

2008-2009  
Howard W. Blake High School  
Tampa, Florida

## Principal's Special Forces Team

Your Most Powerful Weapon is Your Mind



A What We Could Be, Inc. and Suncoast Earth Force Joint Initiative

## HOWARD W. BLAKE HIGH SCHOOL – MAGNET

1701 North Boulevard • Tampa, FL 33607 • Main Office: 272-3422 • Fax: 272-3715  
County of Hillsborough

Jacqueline Haynes, Principal

Howard W. Blake originally opened in September 1956. Today, Blake is a traditional high school with a performing and visual arts magnet component. The school provides a rigorous college preparatory education and a highly intense performing and visual arts magnet program for our student population. The magnet component includes music, chorus, band, guitar, piano, theater, dance, drama, creative writing and the visual arts. Blake High School was named for Howard W. Blake, a native of Tampa, who attended Florida A&M University, Claflin University, and Atlanta University. His entire life was geared toward guiding young people to their optimal education and vocational potential.

Category/Subgroup	Number of Students by Subgroup	Percent of Population
American Indian, Alaskan Native (I)	7	.6%
Asian, Pacific Islander (A)	14	1%
Black, Non-Hispanic (B)	676	45.6%
Hispanic (H)	287	20.6%
White, Non Hispanic (W)	382	27.1%
Multi-Racial (M)	74	5.1%
Total Students	1440	100%
Economically Disadvantaged (ED)	853	55%
English Language Learners (ELL)	108	8.3%
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	204	13.9%

Data pulled from SDHC/SIP 2008-09

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Steinig is seated in foreground.

'Change rarely comes from the top. What turns an organization around is movement towards change generated from leaders who step forward from the team.'

– Tribes

## Marie “Alex” Steinig

Valedictorian, Blake High School Magnet Program, 2009

Excerpt from Valedictorian Speech Class of 2009

For the past four years we have become more than just acquainted with the birds of early morning. We've stayed up to the wee hours studying for Dr. Gray's Free Response quizzes. We've procrastinated and waited until the day before Mr. Fairweather's APQ was due to actually start it. We've tried to avoid being called slap retarded by Mr. Gillyard when we timidly raised our hands to give our feeble answer. We've harassed Mr. Jerald out of nothing but love and an intense passive aggressive inclination rooted deeply somewhere in being told we sound like booty when we all know how jazzy Blake really is. All these teachers dragged us kicking and screaming towards excellence, affording us those nearly ethereal moments that seem to come

straight out of that one movie where the teacher inspires their students.

We have overcome Blake vs Middleton games and there was body paint, one of the many reasons that black and gold will forever run in our veins. We've laid eyes on outlandish pep rallies, self inflicted rodent problems, and spontaneous sing-alongs to Rick Astley's classic song, successfully Rick Rolling everyone within earshot. There were memorable gas-leak evacuations and the incredible ride known as the ***Principal's Special Forces Team, subgroup of the Earth Force, that gave us our Crowdstopper Fridays and transformed the school.*** We have witnessed the manifestation of friendships like Jerry and Robby, Abnerd and BK, Eric and Remus, Hanna and DeeJay, Tyler and Kevin, and Coach Greco and Mr. Williams take root which can only seem to be attributed to divine intervention. There was all the eating too much fast food before performances, the disaster that was dodgeball club, and begging our second period teachers to turn on their T.V.'s to let us watch the presidential inauguration. We have spent long hours here at Blake dedicated to our majors, sweaty and hungry and tired and wondering when we developed this masochistic need for excellence. We've been told time and time again that we were the most shocking if not the worst group of students that the world has ever seen only to shrug it off and trudge along.

But through it all, we not only survived these four years at Blake High School, but thrived and shamelessly gorged ourselves on its one of a kind atmosphere. Blake has a culture of all its own. We thrived with one goal in mind: graduation.

We are yellow jackets. We will always be yellow jackets. The utmost fiber of our being will be that mighty yellow jacket pride.

## From the Principal



As Principal of Blake High School I take great pride and joy in serving the students, parents, staff and the community that makes Blake such a wonderful educational institution. I have been in the field of education for more than 20 years as a classroom teacher, guidance counselor, assistant principal, and principal. Most of my experiences have been in schools located in East Hillsborough County. However, after receiving a position in the urban area, I was faced with new experiences that have allowed me to grow as an administrator. These have been the most rewarding and exhilarating experiences in my career. I am extremely proud of the accomplishments that we have made in making our school an institution of learning. As an educator, I have found that it does indeed take a village to improve the academic performance of our students.

Our schools need dedicated and committed community leaders to partner with us to make the experiences happen that you will read about in this book. With the support of our community, our schools experience significant growth, resulting in valuable mentoring experiences, and partnerships with our educators. These efforts assist in increasing the academic performance and college and career readiness of our students, which is our ultimate goal and contribution to society.

I am so grateful to Jeannette Bradley, Diana Kyle and the Principal's Special Forces Team for their involvement, dedication and commitment in making this vision a reality. It truly does take a village to raise a child.

Jacqueline K. Haynes  
Principal

# Step 1: Checking it Out

Purpose: Learn about your community's strengths and challenges



When it comes to student achievement, whose responsibility is it? About twenty-one students, parents and teachers representing Blake came together at the WWCB House in Tampa Heights to try to answer that very question one Saturday morning, February 2, 2008. Students openly shared their personal experiences giving their view of what is happening in schools today. Several themes emerged: (1) Despite the organization and programs designed to build leaders among students, visible student leadership is lacking. (2) Students feel overwhelmed by negative peer pressure. (3) Students do not feel the curriculum is “relevant” to their everyday experiences. (4) Students and teachers do not relate to each other. (5) Parents need to remove obstacles (i.e., job constraints, time) to be more involved in their school’s/child’s education.

What began as a small impromptu meeting quickly emerged into Dreams for Teens (DFT), a joint community-student-teacher endeavor created to work together to help students achieve their fullest potential. Their goal is to improve the learning experiences and academic outcomes for ALL students as stated in their agreed upon mission —*provide a safe, supportive, and unified community accountable for providing equal access to education, resources, and information that enables all students to be responsible for the pursuit of their dreams and for making relevant choices that propel them along the many pathways of success*” (Dreams for Teens, 3/2008). Using a participatory process they surveyed what was working (Avid, Extended Learning Program, E-mail, IMPACT, sports/mentorship activities, business partnerships, pockets of community support) and what they felt was not working (i.e., late busses, cell phone/IPOD policy, activity bus remote drop off locations, lack of quality school supplies, large class size, redundant curriculum, poorly motivated/unreachable students, lack of parent/teacher/student support, corporal punishment for all caused by the few, lack of consistency, poor communication/information sharing, fighting, aged data in Edline/progress reporting). After weeks of brainstorming, the following inventory was generated to address six key “areas of concern.”

1. Improve Academics: motivation, relevance, degree of challenge
2. Change Behaviors: consistency in discipline, safety, corporal punishment, classroom behaviors
3. Improve Communication: lack of information about available support, resources, and opportunities; unequal distribution of information
4. Increase Community Involvement: lack of parent and community support, insufficient business involvement, inadequate communication
5. Improve Relationships: need better relationships between all groups; need to target hard to reach students; need to reach out to parents, alumni, and community better; parents, alumni, community, in turn, need to respond to school efforts to reach them
6. Utilize Available Resources: quality and quantity of classroom supplies, networking, insufficient funds for special needs, lacking community support

## Step 2: Choosing One

Issue Selection: Choosing an environmental issue that you want to address.



One adult involved in the original meeting joined the national non-profit "Earth Force," a group that works with youth all over the US who choose to work on a year-long "service learning" project to improve or solve a problem. Earth Force "service learning" projects are youth-driven, youth-voice and youth-empowering. Because "service learning" counts as community

service hours, the Earth Force Service Learning methodology was adopted to directly engage Blake students to lend their voices and talents to help eliminate the causes of a specific problem already identified by Dreams for Teens.

After a brief discussion in September 2008 with Principal Haynes who expressed an interest in creating a student-driven mentoring/tutoring project that would improve retention rates, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores and the overall school culture, Ms. Haynes opened the door for implementing a student-led Dreams for Teens initiative. Seniors and juniors would be engaged in "direct service" as "service learning tutors/mentors" charged with empowering freshmen and sophomores to make good decisions about their education. We questioned whether or not it was possible for freshmen and sophomores to feel as if they could help make Blake a "B" school.

The Principal's Special Forces Team (PSFT) was formed as a pilot program to help students with diverse backgrounds "improve academics" through relationship tutoring, the chosen 2008-09 Earth Force Project that would engage peers in relevant and



meaningful tutorial activities designed by them to positively impact their school while stretching them cognitively and developmentally. The special operation required the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines and actively involved the students in their own learning. The primary goal of the special forces operation was to help improve the culture at Blake High School while raising the school grade using existing resources — an elite team of students, FCAT Prep Manuals, previous years' FCAT Releases, and FCAT Explorer, the free on-line prep tool. The 2008-09 goal/mission was to increase FCAT scores from a "level 2" to a "level 3 or better" resulting in raising the overall school grade from a "D" to a "B."

### I. IMPROVE ACADEMICS

Help students and parents understand student records through "Pace Letters." **Student Permanent Record Worksheets** should be sent to student's homes (by mail, home visits or via community forums) with individualized explanatory student status letters (e.g., student is behind pace, on pace or ahead of pace for graduation).

## Step 3: Discovery

### Policy & Community Practice Research: Understanding the issue and how to address it.



Calculations were done to determine how many FCAT scores (math and reading combined) Blake would need to increase individual scores from a level 2 to a level 3 in order to raise the grade. Underclassmen who had at some time during middle school earned at least a 3 on their FCAT, but in the most recent year dropped to a level 2 were invited to join the operation. It was estimated that one hundred teams moving at least one grade level (2 to 3) would help Blake reach its goal.

The special operations mission was inspired by the children's novel *Seedfolks*, "where Newbery Medal winner, Paul Fleischman, creates an urban garden that brings a new sense of hope and community to a bleak Cleveland neighborhood. The book consists of a series of different characters with personal reasons that bring each one to a vacant lot to plant and nourish seeds. Despite prejudices, hesitations, and language differences, the estranged neighbors begin to find ways of overlooking these barriers to develop new relationships with each other. Before long the multi-ethnic seed folks have developed a sense of pride and fellowship. The distinct voices of each character show the reader the vast differences and similarities that can exist simultaneously among diverse people, and how these differences can actually help those people form a community as vibrant and rich as the garden they have created."<sup>1</sup>

As in Fleischman's novel, the PSFTeam Project would bring new experiences for both mentor and mentee as together the unlikely study buddies solve a problem that positively impacts the entire Blake community.

"As force multipliers<sup>2</sup>," upperclassmen were to "pass the torch," "plant seeds" and then "nourish" the underclassmen's latent desire to succeed in school by sharing their own success tactics they themselves learned while matriculating through Blake. In doing so, the unlikely pairings would prove to challenge the very foundation of the upperclassmen's social maturity by igniting an awareness of their link to a much larger "system" thus creating a heightened sense of responsibility and empowerment to positively impact their communities.

<sup>1</sup>A Guide to Teaching Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks*

<sup>2</sup>**Force multiplication**, in military usage, refers to a combination of attributes or advantages which make a given force more effective than another force of comparable size. A **force multiplier** refers to a factor that dramatically increases (hence "multiplies") the effectiveness of an item or group.





## Step 4: Deciding What to Do

### Goal and Strategy Selection: Deciding what to change and how to change it.



With its unique blend of both traditional and performing arts students coming together from neighborhoods across Hillsborough county as one student body, approximately two hundred select upperclassmen and select underclassmen with diverse backgrounds signed a contract of mutual benefit to volunteer to tutor (or be tutored) in a one-to-one relationship

for approximately seven months. Initial teams were partnered according to their lunches through a self-selection process during their lunch periods to give each paired team the opportunity to use the lunch hour to conduct the special “relationship tutoring” operation. Students were also paired according to their FCAT weaknesses and strengths (e.g., underclassmen weak in math were paired with upperclassmen citing math as their strength) as well as their likes and dislikes, hobbies, etc. The unlikely partnerships resulted in a cross-pollination of traditional and magnet students coming together as one cohesive achievement-focused team.

Juniors and Seniors who “chose” to give of their time to participate in the program received “service learning hours” (or community service hours) for all properly documented hours spent tutoring for the FCAT or helping another student with homework. From each other, they learned to value different cultures, home lives, values and attitudes to advance a common cause in which they both believe.

To successfully launch the program, prior to deployment, PSFT partners were trained for their service learning mission in both one-on-one and group sessions to help participants understand their roles, the skills and information required, and the sensitivity to the student with whom they would be paired. Juniors and seniors could elect to attend two on-site trainings held during their lunch periods. The trainings were conducted by Nadia Combs, Owner, A+CAT, who volunteered to work with the teams covering *Tips on Tutoring, Information about Peer Tutoring and 99 ways to say Very Good*. To avoid pulling students out of class in excess, most PSFT group meetings to inform were scheduled during the three lunch hours leaving it up to the students to attend at will (youth empowerment). Mass text messaging (service donated by [www.TEXTHUB.com](http://www.TEXTHUB.com)) was used to communicate 2-3 messages each week prior to 7:30 a.m. and/or after 2:50 p.m. to comply with the school cell phone policy. In addition to text messaging, PSFTeam updates were e-mailed to teachers to keep them abreast of PSFT events, activities and goals. Because of the high demand of teachers’ time and the high competition for attention during the lunch periods

#### II. CHANGE BEHAVIORS

- Implement quarterly **character development themes - Respect, Citizenship, Perseverance, Tolerance**. Themes include relevant music during class transition times, banners, and contests. Encourage teachers to incorporate themes into class lessons/discussions wherever possible.
- Develop programs to build school spirit and pride (e.g., class competitions, scholarships, partnerships).

(i.e., students visiting with friends) meeting attendance waned, save the small numbers generally found in any effort/project demanding sacrifice on the part of its participants (Pareto's Principle or the 80-20 Rule).

Once paired, each underclassmen was schooled on his/her FCAT Summary sheets where individual test results from the previous year were explained in detail. Each had the option to share FCAT results with his/her assigned peer-tutor to allow precision tutoring sessions to address specific weaknesses.

In addition, Johntha Gillyard (math department) and John Fairweather (English department) agreed to serve as internal advisors to PSFTeams needing advice or help finding creative ways to teach the FCAT material or work with their peers. Jeannette Bradley, What We Could Be, Inc. and Diana Kyle, Suncoast Earth Force, both community volunteers were also available in a classroom adjacent to the lunch room (Vespa Room) during the lunch periods to provide on-the-spot coaching incorporating the Myers Briggs Type mini-personality assessments to help students better understand and appreciate each other's differences; to serve as sounding boards and to provide ongoing encouragement.

Students had the choice to carry out their special forces operation (i.e., the actual tutoring and relationship building) off campus (library, book store, coffee shop or at one of their homes) or on school campus. Teams could choose to meet during their lunch periods in pre-approved areas such as the Vespa Room, the Success Lab, the Library, or in designated classrooms and/or the football stadium bleachers. The yellow jacket (school mascot) sticker affixed to their student IDs was the pass they must present to advance to the front of the lunch line. All PSFTeams operated under principles of self-motivation, commitment, honesty, respect, and teamwork. We encouraged PSFTeams to take full advantage of weekends and school holidays to get ahead in their preparations for the FCAT in March.



*Unlikely Study Buddies Samantha and Melinda, and Selena and Victoria found studying in library during VIP Tour as Scott Willis, Exec. Director Suncoast Earth Force looks on.*

Though awkward and unwieldy in its launch, the teams were finally deployed to execute the mission. It should be noted, however, not all high-achieving students were comfortable making such a commitment and declined or failed to follow through on their contract expressing "no time" or "no confidence" that the school could actually make such a shift. To that end, those PSFT student tutors taking on the challenge eventually decided to open the peer-to-peer tutoring opportunity to the entire student body during all three lunches by inviting and developing partnerships well beyond the original one hundred student pairings.

# Step 5: Getting it Done

## Planning & Taking Civic Action: Designing and completing the Earth Force Action Project.



In October, with weeks passing rapidly, Blake students had until March 10th to get as many underclassmen as

possible “mentally” and “emotionally” ready to meet the challenge to raise the school grade. The FCAT reading and math assessment was scheduled for three days— March 10th, 11th and 12th, 2009. To increase awareness among all students several initiatives were designed including two activities that never made it off the ground (i.e., TV raffle and documentary) most likely due to poor communication, poor planning and inadequate internal/external support. More successful initiatives included the following:

### **CROWDSTOPPER FRIDAYS** – As

a source of motivation to tackle the identified social problem to improve the culture from an emotional position, students hosted Crowdstopper Fridays which took place every Friday through March 9th. At Crowdstopper rallies, students invited both community and internal student talent on Fridays during their lunch periods to encourage sophomores and freshmen to connect their academic performance (their grades, their behavior, their FCAT scores) to life success. Students, regardless of programs (magnet or traditional) who wanted to share their talent could sign up to perform by talking to PSFT seniors Francisco Valentin, Brittany McCoy and Tia Harris prior to Friday.

### **III. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION**

- Implement weekly open discussion groups for students during the lunch periods, allowing students, community, and teachers to chat with each other, explore character development themes and discuss issues relevant to improving the school culture.
- Blake has a website, but it is not used to a great degree. Maintain an interactive **website** to include important activities, events, and programs in a more timely manner. Involve students more. To know what’s going on right now at Blake High School, direct students and parents to <http://blake.mysdhc.org> for all of their information.
- Blake Television Tech Magnet Program. Televisе Blake’s **Morning Show** daily on a consistent basis. Allow students to run the show and report ALL NEWS, ALL EVENTS. Incorporate theater majors. Encourage all teachers to turn on the television every day towards the last 20 minutes of second period.
- Secure **television monitors** to be placed throughout the lunch room to televisе events, magnet and talent programs and announcements throughout the day.

## CHAT 'N' CHEW WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

– PSFT students were encouraged to participate in Dreams for Teens Thursday Chat 'N' Chew lunch conversations which allowed all students the opportunity to explore issues relating to the school's Character Development Initiative, their readiness for college, post graduation plans, and other relevant student/school issues. The conversations, facilitated by Dreams for Teens community partners Kathy Browne, Joshua Browne and Jeannette Bradley, encouraged open, honest straight talk about issues at Blake, in their communities and in the world.

**PSFT SERVICE LEARNING AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES** – In addition to "relationship" tutoring, PSFT upper and underclassmen had the opportunity to attend Dreams for Teens sponsored programs such as the Brain Expansion Scholastic Training (BEST) Program which assists underrepresented students in becoming successful applicants for post-secondary educational programs in the health professions; and during lunch once a month, the SMART Club which through KnowHow2Go and USF SIFE (Students in Financial Enterprise), helps students make the most out of high school and become prepared to pursue further educational opportunities. Blake students could also volunteer to host various school and community events (i.e., PSFTeam fund raisers, VIP Tours, Crowdstopper Fridays) and could participate in other school and Earth Force supported service projects in the community (e.g., Lowry Park and Picnic Island clean up drives).

**TALLAHASSEE TRIP** – In March of 2009, with unanswered e-mails and phone calls that didn't get through to state elected officials still in cue, seven groggy PSFTeam delegates left for Florida's capitol, Tallahassee, to show support for the Service Learning legislation scheduled to go before the Senate committee. Their individual PSFT experiences had given them first-hand knowledge of how service learning in schools changes lives.

Unsure of what to expect, the PSFT junior/senior delegation — Hispanic, Black, White, valedictorian, introverts, extroverts, music enthusiasts, dancers, science enthusiasts—most of whom didn't know each other prior to the road trip, began a process of bonding with each other and finding common ground. After arriving in Gainesville, over breakfast, conversations gradually began moving from polite student-to-coach exchanges to a vibrant student-to-student exchange of ideas.

**Note to PSFTeam,** *"Don't be afraid to venture outside of your circle. You can find common interests with people with different backgrounds. We have more in common than we realize."*

## IV. INCREASE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Reestablish PTSA or start support group "Parent Brigade" to provide, establish, and maintain partnerships, attend board meetings, promote programs, raise funds.
- Establish ongoing relationships with members of the community to encourage a regular presence on site at Blake High School volunteering their services tutoring, college counseling, library, office, and actively participating in programs aimed at closing the achievement gap. Encourage the alumni, businesses and community to have a greater presence on campus during peak school hours, perhaps developing a "helping hands" and or "freelance parent" program that encourages businesses to allow parents to volunteer in their child's schools during each month.

## V. IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS

Begin open forum "Chat 'N' Chew" where students, teachers and community come together to talk to get past barriers to teaching, learning.

Hours later at the Tallahassee hotel, the eager now bonded travelers resumed making phone calls to legislators to schedule meetings to “tell the Blake PSFT story.” Meetings are confirmed, but not without an important lesson. **Note to PSFTeam,** *“Rudeness and abruptness get you rudeness and abruptness and don’t get you in the door!”* Next stop—the Capitol.

Navigating the capitol to the Senate and House floors, observing Senate pages perform a mock Senate session, attending scheduled meetings with legislative leaders (Senator Arthenia Joyner, Representative Betty Reed, Representative Bill Heller) and finally, sitting in on an actual Senate committee meeting, the PSFT delegation got a rare opportunity to see first-hand what happens on Capitol Hill. There are mountains of data to sift through and compelling opposing arguments to process before voting on any given issue. **Note to PSFTeam,** *“Just like students, it’s important for our legislators to do their research and their homework to make the best decision possible. When it comes to our daily lives, legislators really do make a difference.”*

The “Outdoors Florida” Kick-off provided the PSFT delegation opportunity to lead a team of elementary students in a bevy of planned outdoor activities that consequentially highlighted inherent weaknesses in the introverts (who were visibly outside of their comfort zones) and inherent strengths in the extraverts. Recognizing and embracing their individual leadership styles, all seven PSFTeam delegates learned to find their own rhythms and rose to the occasion. **Note to PSFTeam,** *“While leading others comes easier for extraverts than introverts, both can use their individual strengths to inspire and lead others to achieve great things.”*

After a visit to FAMU and Florida State campuses, the Florida Learn and Serve Program was hosted at the hotel where students, mainly elementary age, gathered to learn and share information about their school projects. **Note to PSFTeam,** *“Service learning initiatives that engage younger kids to identify, research and mobilize a community to solve a problem much bigger than themselves —Priceless.”*

Before departing Tallahassee for Tampa, the PSFT delegation returned to the Capitol for a final push to convince legislators to support the Service Learning bill and last to attend the Florida Learn and Serve Rally in the Capitol Court yard.

Back in Tampa, three days older, delegates were different having allowed themselves to be changed by each other and by their shared experiences. A final **Note to Blake PSFTeam,** *“Can’t explain it, but transformation happens when one dares to open oneself for prolonged uninterrupted periods to people who have different backgrounds and different views.”*

## VI. UTILIZE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

- Implement a “Pass the Torch” program that would allow upperclassmen to “give back” by giving hints, suggestions, and information that may be of help to underclassmen. Have departing seniors write letters “if I knew then what I know now” letters to underclassmen.
- Improve use of existing resources. Advertise the Success Lab more. It is under utilized; invite all 9th graders for orientation to lab; should be closer to lunch room; allow Volunteers to use it; make lab available after school.

# Step 6: Wrapping Up

## Reflecting, Going Public & Planning for the Future



Did Blake High School meet its goal to be an “**A**” school?

School Grading Scale				
A=525	Blake's GOAL B=495	C=435	D=395	F=394 and below

No. Blake remained a “D” school for 2008-09 school year. Blake students scored 473 points based on the number of students scoring a level 3 or above as well as those demonstrating learning gains in Reading and Math. The total score (473) earned Blake a high-level “C.” Blake was awarded:

- one (1) point for each percentage of students meeting high standards in reading, math and science at Level 3 or above and in writing at Level 3.5 and above. ( $39 + 68 + 44 + 84 = 235$ )
- one (1) point for each percentage of Blake students making learning gains in reading and math [i.e., Blake students improving from one achievement Level to the next (e.g.,  $1 \rightarrow 2$  or  $4 \rightarrow 5$ ) or Blake students maintaining a Level 3, 4, or 5 or Blake students maintaining a low achievement level but demonstrating one year’s growth greater than the Developmental Scale Score (DSS) cut for their particular level]. ( $46 + 73 = 119$ )
- one (1) point for each percentage of students in the bottom 25% making annual learning gains. ( $42 + 67 = 109$ )
- an **additional 10 Bonus points** because of the outstanding contributions made by Juniors and Seniors passing the 2008-09 FCAT.

However, Blake was penalized<sup>(P)</sup> because at least 50% of the bottom 25% did not make learning gains in reading for a second year in a row. Instead of receiving the “C,” Blake was dropped one letter grade receiving a “D” for a third consecutive year.

Blake's 2008-2009 State Report Card				
	Reading	Math	Science	Writing
% Level 3 or above	39	68	44	
% Making Annual Learning Gains	46	73		
% Bottom Quarter Making Annual Learning Gains	42	67		
Level % 3.5 or above				84
Our Total Points =			473 = <del>X</del> D <sup>P</sup>	

## Did Blake meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for 2008 - 2009?

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires that public school and every district make adequate progress each year toward state proficiency goals. Blake students did not make AYP because (1) Blake received a “D” school grade, (2) no subgroup, except White students in math, met the annual measurable school target, (3) the percentage of students not proficient did not decrease by 10% from the previous year.

However, while Blake’s overall school grade was penalized or dropped by one whole letter grade taking it from a C to a D<sup>P</sup> due to the poor performance recorded by the bottom 25% of students taking the test, there was, in fact, improvement over last year’s scores as the low-performing students placed 5th in actual learning gains among the bottom 25% of students in Hillsborough County.

In addition, of the twenty-five high schools in Hillsborough County, Blake’s 9th and 10th graders contributed greatly to Blake’s 2nd place finish in Math learning gains and 6th in reading learning gains.

	Writing		Reading		Math	
	Proficiency %	MET AYP?	Proficiency %	MET AYP?	Proficiency %	MET AYP?
Total	92	Yes	36	No	63	No
White	94	Yes	64	No	85	Yes
Black	89	No	17	No	46	No
Hispanic	89	No	32	No	60	No
Economically Disadvantaged	90	Yes	24	No	53	No
English Language Learners	N/A			N/A	N/A	
Students with Disabilities	76	Yes		N/A	N/A	

## What can Blake students do to meet next year’s AYP and to become an “A” school in 2009-10?

Increase the number of level 3s enough to move its school grade point total from 473 to 495 (minimum) and avoid having Blake’s grade dropped by one level by employing *inclusive* strategies that will engage and increase the learning gains of its bottom 25% of students by implementing the following:

1. **Student Government** – include measurable specific results-driven objectives for Blake’s Student Government Association (SGA) in the School Improvement Plan; through SGA, involve the entire student body in its implementation.



The largest enemies of change are apathy, "no," "not yet," "I don't have the time, and it's not my responsibility."

– Tribes

2. **Peer-to-Peer Relationship Tutoring** – Students in such clubs as the National Honor Society, Spanish Honor Society, and Key Club, should become relationship tutors for Bright Futures Scholarship eligible hours to help address low performing subgroups and mid-level students who are encouraged to take on more rigor in honors and AP classes.
3. **Extended Learning Programs (ELP)** – In addition to after school ELP, add before school and lunchtime ELP (tutoring); change the name to something more recognizable to the average student –Jacket Study Hall– and move *this special operation* (powered by Blake scholars seeking Bright Futures Scholarship eligible hours) to a more visibly accessible area (e.g., Vespa Room, cafeteria). In addition to homework help and FCAT Prep help, include the BEST Program, ACT/SAT Prep.
4. **Showcase Talent and Tie to Academic Excellence** – Embrace a 21st Century Blake High School. As such, allow students to “informally” celebrate one of its main *raison d'être* (reasons for being) as often as is practical in a performing arts showcase available to all students during the lunch hour. Use the talent showcase as an avenue by which existing traditional students, who meet criteria, might apply/audition to a magnet program by invitation. Use the technical TV production students to create “jacket buzz” through video shorts that help tie excellence in academics and character development with excellence in the arts, in sports and in life. Use the visual media wisely with ample reach by adding more monitors to common areas (e.g., cafeteria, Vespa Room) to help publicize this important correlation that will help sustain Blake’s drive towards academic excellence. In addition to existing sports teams, honor societies, and service clubs, commit resources to innovative youth empowerment programs that embrace youth voice and student achievement as well as endorse a student’s responsibility to pursue his/her own dreams (e.g., Chat N’ Chew, The Morning Show run by students, Crowdstoppers, Jacket Study Hall powered by students, the B.E.S.T. Program; SMART Club; Dreams for Teens, Principal’s Special Forces Team, Debate Club, etc.).





PSFTeam discuss the program with Superintendent MaryEllen Elia.

## Jeannette Bradley

Life Coach/Founder, What We Could Be, Inc.; PSFT Program Volunteer

Diana Kyle, Program Director, Earth Force, and I spent the entire year engaged with Blake students on this massive service learning pilot project to improve the culture enough to make Blake an “A” school in 2008-09. We believe the change, while not reflected in the final school grade, is most evident in the momentum created by the few participating students, acting as “force multipliers,” towards a more empowered student body with a heightened sense of awareness of the impact one can have on a community when working towards a common goal. They became the much needed “spark” that will make all the difference in a much longer run towards academic excellence for all students at Blake High School. In the words of Oprah Winfrey, “here is what I know for sure”: **Blake students are responsible.** However, they cannot continue their journey toward excellence alone. They need us, the village— students, parents, community leaders, local businesses—to join their teachers, their “special forces mission” to help raise student achievement levels for ALL students in 2009-10 and beyond. If not us, who? If not now, when?

## Leah Kline

Title I Resource Teacher, Freshman Class Sponsor/ Title I Parent Liaison

I was so excited to hear about the plan for the Principal’s Special Forces Team. I’ve been a teacher at Blake since our Charter Year back in 1996. I love Blake, and I believe in the power of positive thinking. I tried to connect a mentor/ buddy group back in 2006, but I struggled with finding a common planning time for students. The Principal’s Special Forces Team’s plan to work with students during a common lunch time fired me up with excitement. I was especially excited that we would be using the 50-minute lunch period as a productive time including tutoring, relationship building and Crowd stoppers that would offer motivation to all students.

I believe we all picked up on the positive energy that was involved with this program. We had support from the community, consistent community members and faculty teams that were cheering on positive possibilities and students that were acting as leaders and facilitators. We then had the students that were receiving help that started to work on their commitment to learning and success because their actions were now going to have to be accountable to their peers and to their school.



'People who believe in a cause will help get parents and other volunteers involved in order to move the cause forward. They will be recruiters for the cause.'

– Tribes

## Carlos Santiago—Senior

The Principal's Special Forces Team was a success, although it took time and effort. When the program started it was slow to move, mostly the organization, planning and getting the word out about our intentions. The first pairing of Freshmen and Seniors was admittedly awkward, although most of the partnerships blossomed eventually. I was not so fortunate. I have always been a shy, introverted person, and my partner was Jillian, who was just as shy, but lacked the motivation I had. Over the first few weeks, I attempted to tutor Jillian every school day. Honestly it didn't feel as though we were making progress or if she even wanted to. Despite my efforts, we eventually drifted. I still participated in the Earth Force volunteering events, another part of the PSFT that benefited the students by giving us the opportunity for hours necessary for the Bright Futures scholarships. The most influential and interesting events were the Lowry Park Hillsborough River cleanup, the Auction and the first of the Earth Force fund raisers. In order to expand knowledge of the PSFT and the awareness of the importance of the FCAT, we opened the tutoring to all students, not just the original Freshmen. With the increase in tutoring and the addition of Crowdstoppers, an attention getter during the school lunches to entertain the students while spreading the message of FCAT, the PSFT took off. Not only did we prepare for the FCAT, but now we helped in school as well. When the team opened up the

***Do you think we changed Blake from a "D" to a "B" school?***

**Yes...**

"From what I heard the students were more attentive this year."

"We all got together and worked hard for something we wanted."

"People tried harder to achieve this year."

"It's very motivating when students see other motivated students."

"We have definitely improved but not sure if we're a 'B' yet but we're trying hard."

"Students were really encouraged to change the school's grade."

tutoring I was introduced to Sapna, a young junior from India, who was the polar opposite of my past partner. She was extremely willing to learn and very open, stating her thoughts with little doubt on herself. I became more confident the more we tutored each day and I watched her, understanding her as she grew and became more open, quickly making friends. As the FCAT approached, I felt confident enough to help Jillian again, shortly before the documentary began. The tutoring sessions and my job at the movie theater gave me the confidence to be less introverted.

'There is more risk of failure if you do nothing than if you do something.'  
—Tribes



## Justina James—Freshman

This program had many wonderful things to offer. The partners they had put together I thought were a good idea because I thought it could really help me with the FCAT. But I really wasn't focused on that because my mind was too focused on basketball. I love basketball. It is my passion in life and will be my way into college. I have a best friend name Jessica Causey; she was my basketball buddy and more. She always was there for me and I love her for it.

I felt my partner really didn't want to work with me. I felt that she really hated me and she didn't want to be my partner anymore. When she passed me in the hallway, she gave me the nastiest looks and when I passed her she would not even say Hi. She couldn't deal with my "gangsta' status."

But she was nice at times. That was ok. I liked when we both had a concert at the same time. It was the Christmas one and it was a big success.

Where was I when they had all these people come to perform? When La Loca gave me her number, she made me feel like I could do anything. When she said she would come to our games, it made me think that people do care out there. I really want her number again because she made me feel special. I'm different now than I was at the beginning of the year, because I am more mature. I used to be overwhelmed with high school. At the end of the year, I know what I can do, what I can't and know how to get my energy under control.



## Briana Binns —Senior

The Special Task Force was a positive and negative experience for me. There wasn't much support from my peers or my mentee.



## Timothy Gadsden —Junior

As much as you think I'm involved with Blake, I'm really not. I'm in many clubs such as Gospel Choir, S.M.A.R.T. and Chat N' Chew. I really stay out of the other things. The reason I'm in these clubs is because I feel good when I sing, when I help others and when I say what I feel. I never really cared to know anything about any other clubs. I joined Chat N' Chew because I don't put myself out there. I am not trying to get tied up in too many activities.

Being in the Chat N' Chew was a way to get my voice to be heard. Chat N' Chew touched and changed someone like me. I now understand my direction in life and I feel that everyone should at least come to one meeting. I mean Chat N' Chew is the place where anyone can speak their mind and feel safe. That's what Blake needs BIG time. Being at Blake this year, I've noticed as a school we have grown. This is one of the best schools.



## Khyllir Patton —Junior

An eye-opening experience is what I'd call it. My life changed when I began working with PSFT. It changed in ways I didn't expect. I began to look at situations differently that I could help. For example: I gained knowledge in the process of tutoring. I mainly tutored in reading on Saturdays, and from this experience I became fully devoted to the growth of this program (PSFT).

I was really grateful to be a part of the trip to Tallahassee, FL. I gained knowledge about the governmental circumstances in Florida. I also learned how to speak up and be an extrovert during important circumstances. The team members that were on the trip with me were all leaders in our school and that factor made our trip productive and organized.



'Commitment is a big part of leadership. The ability to stick with the dream for a long time. Long enough that the critics realize that you're going to get there one way or another.'

– Tribes

## Francisco Valentin—Senior

As I was agreeing to be part of this project, I didn't really know completely what I was agreeing to be part of. I had an idea of what it was about--helping an underclassman do better on their FCAT--but I hadn't gotten the bigger picture. I heard the melody, but not its harmonies.

It is hard for me to write about "my experience" in this project, being that for the most part I feel like I was a voyeur most of the time, rather than a fully-devoted participant. For the most part, I didn't really experience this project by taking action in it and getting it moving as much as I did by contemplating it, what it was doing, and what it could do.

To make it clear, I did have an underclassman to tutor for the FCAT. I just didn't tutor him as much as I feel was enough to fully serve the main purpose of this project, or what I thought to be the main purpose of this project.

I began hearing the harmonies slowly later on. The project was expanding. Banners were set up at school motivating the underclassmen to do better on the FCAT to raise the school grade, which had been a "D" for almost three years, and also to get a passing score so that these underclassmen could graduate later on. Furthermore, a weekly show called "Crowdstoppers" was set up, which consisted of Blake students showcasing their talents and entertaining the other students during the lunches with the purpose of further motivating them to do better on the FCAT. For this I asked to be part of. I have always wanted to use my songs as a tool to motivate people with my messages and this provided the perfect opportunity to do just that. And just that I did, and the sound became more clear.



Who are the heros? Those that hold an opinion at odds with what is generally accepted. They do things differently. They are powerful. They take time to help others. They take time to make change happen.'

– Tribes



## Francisco Valentin continued..

Perhaps what helped me hear the most was the trip we did to Tallahassee, in which we discussed what we were doing with the project with several senators and representatives and pushed for our FCAT scores to arrive sooner than normal. Discussing not only helped me realize how important this project is, but also gave a clearer view on what the project really is. In this trip we also toured colleges and some of us met with professionals in the area that we were planning to focus on in our lives. Some of us even discovered that we would be interested in getting involved in politics. This all gave a clearer view, but what ultimately removed the blindfold was a conversation I was having with Ms. Bradley and Mrs. Kyle on our way back home from the trip.

I was talking with them about how guilty I felt about not tutoring my partner enough, having now realized deeper how important the project is and how it was too late because the FCAT had already taken place. They said to me: "is it really too late to help him?" I could see it now. I could hear it now as though a blanket had been placed over the strings that muted the sound and now that blanket was suddenly removed. The project wasn't just about getting a higher score on the FCAT. It's about purpose. It's about finding a purpose and direction in life. Finding the desire to make something great of oneself and one's community and environment. It's about helping provide a sense of direction to the students and encourage a focus towards an enriching life. Enriching not only to themselves, but also to everything that surrounds them. It wasn't just about school pride or the school grade either, it is about taking pride in our surroundings and recognizing our responsibility to nurture it. Feed it. Reinforce it. Acting as being part of it, not just acquainted with it.



### We Are One

We are one,  
Come from one,  
Live in one,  
One world so come,  
You and me,  
We can be,  
In harmony.

Though our creeds,  
Aren't the same,  
And our skin,  
Seems different,  
We're one race,  
The human race,  
We are one.

We are one,  
Come from one,  
Live in one,  
One world so come,  
You and me,  
We can be,  
In harmony.

Brothers please,  
Be at peace,  
And lend a hand,  
To those in need,  
We're one world,  
We're one home,  
We are one.

-Francisco Valentin

Blake High School Senior 2008-09



'Leadership, organizing a team and commitment of the team over a long period of time, ALWAYS will make change occur.'

– Tribes

## Aeysha Tucker—Senior

The thing about the Principal's Special Forces Team that I just think was so great about the program is the way the program catered to the needs of the students here at Blake.

One of the things that the Principal's Special Forces Team did was offered help for people who needed it. They offered tutoring and resources to help further students' education.

I saw that they really care about the students, and their success in life.

I think that students really get encouraged and confident about their academics when they have people who are willing to work with them, teach them and help them. The PSFT really does inspire and help students want to achieve all that they can be.

For me, personally, it helped me because I was able to help and reach out to another, and it gave me some pretty great new friendships I probably wouldn't have had otherwise. It helped me get to know different people and expand my horizons, beyond just the few friends I would associate myself around. It taught me that you should get to know others and not be set in your comfort zones, because you never know who God can place in your life to change your life for the better.

Basically what the Principal's Special Forces Team did for the students, to me was just a beautiful thing. I particularly like that it was really just about the students and what they did

***Do you think we changed Blake from a "D" to a "B" school?***

**No...**

"People don't have enough respect or pride for Blake, so they haven't tried."

"Some people tried and others didn't."

"Not everybody took the studying seriously. The majority did not."

"I'm unsure because some people who got assigned a tutor didn't come to the sessions."

"There's still a nervousness about fights and unacceptable behavior."

"People nowadays come to school to play around not to learn. Honestly I don't think the school will change unless students change first."

"I think it would be very hard to go from a 'D' to a 'B' school. We may have gotten to a 'C.'"

was influenced by the students for the students. It sometimes wasn't working and the PSFT constantly asked for feedback on how to make it better. I hear so many people say, "Yeah, we care about the students," blah blah but many fail to really back it up. The PSFT knew how to back it up and I think they definitely got results.



'Change occurs when leaders recruit other people. They do it for a common cause that they and their friends believe in.'

– Tribes



Marcus, Jenaya and Katherine Vasquez at Chat 'N' Chew

## Marcus McKinnon — Junior

The Vespa room was a sweet escape from the noisy, rowdy, crowded lunchroom. The Chat N' Chews were great with its open discussions that let us share our feelings and receive constructive feedback. Though everything else was fine about them, I feel that it should be called Chat *then* Chew, so people don't get the wrong idea.

## Jenaya Dominski — Junior

Having access to the Vespa room during lunch has been an experience worthwhile. This room has been a place where my friends and I were able to get away from the rest of the world. On Thursday, Chat N' Chew takes place and my friends and I attend every time. I like having a place to talk about anything we want.

## Juan C Morales, Jr. — Junior

I think that the Chat N' Chew on Thursdays is a time where different people come together and talk about any subject and share our different opinions. The Vespa room is a pretty nice, quiet and peaceful place where people can talk about anything and be honest. The time I liked most about Vespa is when we talked about college and two things that describe ourselves. I felt comfortable talking about it and sharing with others!

## Brittney McCoy—Senior

My experience with PSFT has been a learning one. Upon entering the program, I was introverted in many areas of my life and I struggled at public speaking.



## Marquis Miller—Junior

I'm a representative of Howard W. Blake High school's student government and I had the experience of being a part of the Principal's Special Forces Team. I was not initially a part of the program, but some way, somehow I joined the program. At first I did nothing but make posters. From there I started to assist with tutoring students with FCAT reading and math. I somehow had something that Mrs. Kyle and Ms. Bradley liked and they invited me to the educational field trip to Tallahassee.

## Jamal Sanders—Senior

Well, I really didn't pay attention because I passed the FCAT my sophomore year. But I think it is a great way for underclassmen to get involved with making Blake an "A" school. I really enjoyed the presentation from the poet, Wally-B. He got involved with the crowd. His poetry hit home, I could tell that he was an intelligent man. The students in the lunchroom respected him and listened to his work.

### What have you learned from the process of "youth voice and empowerment"?

- Students can effect change when they work together to do so. 30%
- I can make a positive difference in my school if I want to and am willing to work hard. 26%
- I can learn and do well in school, especially when I ask for and receive help. 22%
- I felt like someone cared about me and how well I performed in school. 11%
- Students cannot effect change. They do not have a voice. 11%

*'Remarkable visions are always met with resistance. As your group starts to make progress you will be met with even more resistance. The forces of "mediocrity," i.e. the majority of people, will align to make things more difficult. Just persist.'*

– Tribes

## Treasure Sneed— Freshman

When I first got to this school, I felt like a little kid. It was a lot of things going on around me until I got to my second day at Blake. I came from Pace Center for Girls and Ms. Bradley showed me to this crazy girl name Renee. She is my mentor and she helped me a lot. When I first met her, I was very quiet and she was just so bouncy. I got use to it and I started to loosen up and we GOT ALONG JUST FINE. She is a nice person and bought me a planner so I could put my work in it.



## Renee Jackson—Junior

When I first signed up for the Principal's Special Forces Team, I took it as a joke. I didn't really understand what the group was about, never the less I joined and was paired with the very pregnant Sequoya, who just joined for a T Shirt. She never wanted to raise her FCAT SCORES OR MAKE BLAKE AN "A" SCHOOL, so I dropped her like a hot potato. With Ms. Bradley's and Mrs. Kyle's help I was able to be re-grouped with, Treasure Sneed, my new partner in creating educational chaos. We were like two peas in a pod. I must say being her mentor was not easy. I found myself stood-up for study sessions on numerous occasions. I felt crappy and felt as if she was wasting my time, my lunch time, to go hang out with her little clique of friends. - - - I decided to do the same one day when she actually decided to show up and she was...

## Whitney Anderson—Junior

My first experience with PSFT was trying to make Blake a “B” school. Since a school’s grade is based on student FCAT scores, we had to improve them so that Blake could get a higher grade. I was absolutely honored when I was asked to join PSFT and was partnered with Keenan, who was difficult to work with because he was facing the struggle that most 9th graders face. They are brand new to high school. They want to have a place where they are accepted and most 9th graders have goals to do well, so that way they can graduate and go on to post-secondary institutions. Keenan seemed to let the social aspect of his struggle have priority over the academic. So I struggled to get him to work, because he was worried with being cool. This was the most negative experience I had with PSFT. Other parts of PSFT were the Chat N’ Chew where I enjoyed the opportunity to voice my opinion and the Friday Crowd Stoppers where entertainment was not only performances, but examples on how everyone worked together. I remember when I was first asked to join PSFT. I was honored. When we started the goal was to make Blake a “B” school. This goal was only possible through improving their FCAT scores.

‘Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,  
talented and fabulous. Actually, who are you not to be?’

– Marianne Williamson

### ***Should the PSFT program be in other schools?***

#### ***Yes and No...***

- “It’s something that benefits students academically.”
- “I’m sure it had a positive effect and more schools need that.”
- “No. Nobody takes it serious. It’s not effective that way.”
- “Peer help can be more effective than from an adult.”
- “No. Because it doesn’t help us learn.”
- “Some people are in need of extra help and don’t have money.”
- “It’s a good way to be involved.”
- “It will help the school look better in the long run.”
- “It does no harm and helps students be more aware about FCAT.”
- “It’s a great way to keep kids motivated.”
- “It helps improve student participation.”

My partner was Keenan. He was not really interested in increasing his FCAT scores, so it was difficult to get him to work with me. But as we worked I could see that he wanted to do better. He wanted a better grade on his FCAT. He

was just worried about his reputation with his friends. When we were alone, he was not hard, but when his friends were there, pretended I was non-existent. Having been a ninth grader I can understand this struggle.



## Any Day We Wish

What we ponder and what we think about sets the course of our life.

Any day we wish, we can discipline ourselves to change it all.

Any day we wish, we can open the book that will open our mind to new knowledge.

Any day we wish, we can start a new activity.

Any day we wish, we can start the process of life change.

We can do it immediately, or next week, or next month, or next year.

We can also do nothing.

We can pretend rather than perform.

And if the idea of having to change ourselves makes us uncomfortable, we can remain as we are.

We can choose rest over labor, entertainment over education, delusion over truth, and doubt over confidence.

The choices are ours to make.

But while we curse the effect, we continue to nourish the cause.

As Shakespeare uniquely observed “The fault is not in the stars, but in ourselves.”

We created our circumstances by our past choice.

We have both the ability and the responsibility to make better choices beginning today.

—Jim Rohn



'Students have an obligation to make change. To make things better than anyone has any right to believe is possible. That is the power of youth voice.'

– Tribes

## Jessica Causey—Freshman

I have a best friend named Justina James. I became aware that she was not only a great basketball player but also enjoyed shot put. We have always supported each other in everything we do and I was proud of her because she made it to regional as a freshman and I love her!!! Justina and her partner had very different personalities just like me and her, but we embraced our differences on life. Her partner was not able to deal with Justina's "gangsta" status." If her partner could work beyond Justina's front, she would see Justina is a determined and intelligent young lady that surprises me every day.

This program gave me an opportunity to reach my full potential. I enjoyed our performances and my partner has improved my attitude on the FCAT. I have always struggled on my test taking skills. My tutor gave me some ways to cope with my stress and be able to perform well on my test. I have enjoyed my experience in this program and hope I made a difference here at Blake.

Dreama was a performer from Bush Gardens and I was very impressed by her dance skills and I felt like our school was important to other people in our community, not just to parents and teachers. I think it would devastate many of the students if this program was not here next year. Many of our students cherished this program and changed a lot for the better.

I enjoyed the performances in the cafeteria the most, because we got the whole school involved. People respect talent and when we had various performers, I think it inspired people to want to be part of this program and to help our school be a better learning place. I believe when we said we could make Blake an "A" school, I loved to see my peers striving to succeed and reaching for the same goal.

### ***What kind of impact do you believe the PSFT Project had on Blake students' ATTITUDES?***

Positive	41%
Negative	10%
Unsure	49%

### ***What kind of impact do you believe the PSFT Project had on Blake students' BEHAVIORS?***

Positive	36%
Negative	09%
Unsure	55%

'Change is never perfect.  
Just dive in. It will never  
be perfect because it keeps  
changing.'

– Tribes



▲ Dontae Iverson helps peer Wayne Price (Freshman) while community partner Ms. Bradley looks on

## Dontae Iverson—Senior

Like I've said many times before I was extremely nervous coming into this project. All I knew was the school was not at its best and I didn't want to end my senior year on a bad note. One thing that got to me was the fact that I would be paired with a kid and I'd be responsible for helping him/her turn their whole Academic performance around. And to think I thought this would be easy. Ha, was I off! Then I met Wayne... I thought he was a quiet type of person who keeps to himself. That all changed after a few days with him. I quickly caught on to his personality. He would sometimes avoid me in the hall, and if we were together he'd act distant, just because it was his social time and he didn't want to be seen with a "lame senior."

But there were some good times though. You see, the thing is Wayne is a truly intelligent, well-rounded, young person. He just sometimes makes an onlooker think otherwise. So with us it really wasn't an academic issue, it was more of trying to get him to reach that level of maturity and being ok with being Wayne. So we went to things like PSFT events, brotherhood trips, parades—that was actually his first Gasparilla! Every time we got together he would seem more tolerable of me. It was one thing to try and help encourage a whole half of a high school to actually push them to perform well on some test, but a whole other game when it came to getting your own peers, your friends to help support. It was so irritating whenever I'd go to announce something regarding the PSFT.

The most negative feedback I heard was from my best friends, those fools! They did say stuff like "What's the point, it's not gonna' work" or "These kids don't care what you do." Their favorite line was "Why do you want to be a "B" school? Why not an: 'A' school?" That really ticked us off. These people who criticized us on every turn were doing absolutely nothing to help improve our situation. In the end whatever happened, happened. The objective was to attain our goal and achieve.

We just have to accept that nothing is always certain, all happy and prosperous. There is, sometimes, more opposition than encouragement and you just have to know how to deal with it.



'Mentorship is all about "Follow my lead, I will get you there." Encouraging others to reach for the stars.'

– Tribes

## Quianna Wilkerson—Senior

Being in the Principal's Special Forces Team has helped me to develop into a more confident and outgoing person. At first, I came into the program with the mind set that I would be assisting others, but I actually benefited just as much as my partner. Thinking back to the first time I met Ms. Bradley and Mrs. Kyle and other upperclassmen who planned to participate, I remember feeling intimidated because I was very shy. I didn't like the idea of having to pair myself with someone else due to me being an introvert, but I decided to try it because, I really wanted to help the school's grade and the leaders were really encouraging.

When it came time to pair myself with an underclassman that needed help with FCAT, I was so nervous and a little afraid, but I did it. This is the point where my shell began to break. I just so happened to have paired myself with someone just as shy as I was, but because I was the upperclassman I couldn't show it. So I finally just broke out and became a leader. I had to take the initiative and make her feel comfortable. She was a great partner too. Once I opened up she began to open up too, and we built a friendship.

As the Principal's Special Forces Team began to evolve, more and more students began to come for help, and with my new found confidence, I took on another partner. This partner inspired me even more. He was a very sweet boy with a very strong craving for knowledge and learning. I had to really and completely dedicate myself to him because he wanted so badly to do well.

We strived hard and worked daily. This not only helped him to do better on the FCAT, but it helped me refresh skills that had been tucked away.

The leaders of the PSFT started Crowdstoppers and other things such as group discussions to help get the students motivated. I was asked multiple times to step out and be a leader which helped me to become stronger. I still have friendships with the people I worked with through the time we were together. Even when the FCAT was over the relationships still remained. I think every school should have a PSFT because some students need an alternative to teacher-student learning. The PSFT builds character. Leaders, as well as students, unite throughout the school. This is an experience that can be taken throughout life and I will always remember it.





*'Caring is the key emotion that makes a team a team. Team members care about what happens. They care about their goals and they care about each other. They deeply care.'*

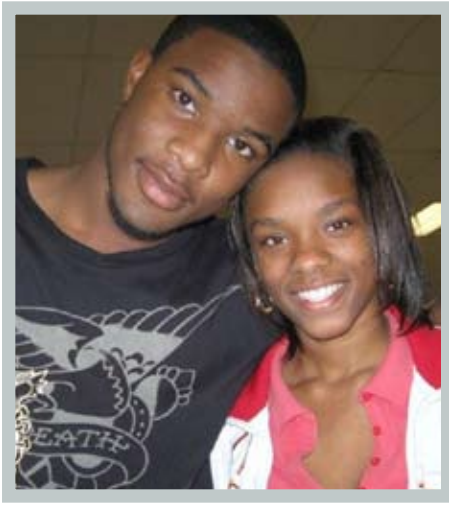
– Tribes

## Sapna Patel—Junior

On my first day Blake High School I enter in a class and give my teacher my schedule. Teacher introduce themselves asked every student, what their name is. I don't know anybody so I was afraid that I wouldn't make any friends. Fourth lunch I don't know anyone on lunch so I eat by myself. I went home and my parents asked me how school was .I say it is good but I don't have any friends and I am sad because I don't have any friends in school. Parents, say don't worry you will get friends. Dad say that you will get friends in the United States you never had before. I say my parents to answer one question. They say, "Yes, my children say it." I say that I have many friends in India. Will I have a friends like this in United States? They answer, "Yes, my children you will get your best friend later on that you never live alone."

Finally, I get a friend, Jennifer. We meet in first period in Chemistry. She is trying to talk with me but I was nervous to speak in front of the class. When class is over the bell rings and she say good bye. I say same thing. Chemistry is hard. I tried myself to work hard but I don't understand. The teacher I asked a question but then still I do not understand. Finally I think myself . Now I love my class in Chemistry.

Now it is second semester both have personal fitness. Some time I do not understand the questions. She will explain it to me when we meet everyday on fifth lunch. We are both eating together in cafeteria. I am new. I want help in FCAT reading and math. I went to learn in Vespa room. I am very happy that somebody teaching me and very excited to learn to speak English. Sometime I am sad and come in Vespa room. Miss will ask what happened. I say I'm sad because in exam I get B grade. I want an "A" grade. Miss will say don't worry you will get next year "A" but you have to work a little bit harder. Miss say now you happy? I say yes, I'm happy. Some friends ask me a question "why are you quiet in class?" I say that teacher didn't give a permission to talk with friends. After that my friend say that I learn something with you. She says that you are my best friend. What you are teaching me is a respect thing in class. Thank you very much. I will never forget in my life.



## Keith B. Jenkins —Senior

I believe that we, as a program, made a difference. It was a long and hard road. There were many times I wanted to give up because it felt like I was wasting time. Some of the people, I worked with just didn't care and thought playing football was more important than school work. It made me madder than anything because these people were really smart, but didn't want to put any effort. They thought it was not cool to be smart. It took me a long time to get them to understand that they can only go so far with football, basketball, etc. A lot of them believed that if they just played football, they didn't need school. I had to show them that even if they were the best player, what would happen if they were not.



Crowdstopper Fridays: Invited guest must "stop the crowd" and get their attention during lunch breaks.

## Katherine Vazquez Andre Smith —Junior —Senior

I've only attended chat and chew a couple times but from what I've experienced it's pretty interesting. We discuss specific subjects and get to know each other. A couple weeks ago we discussed images and how we are seen in the eyes of others. I found it different and enjoyed our talking sessions. I got to know some people a lot better.

The performances at lunch were fun and exciting. I liked when Bernard 'BK' Jackson performed and I thought it was good. I really think it was good because BK is really known around school and people who are known around school have a better chance.

## Special Thank You's to:



Florida Learn & Serve:

Joe Follman, Director

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Suncoast Earth Force [www.earthforce.org/suncoast](http://www.earthforce.org/suncoast)

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Bill Heller

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### **Individual Donors, Contributors, Guests:**

Wally "B", Heard 'Em Say

Chloe Coney

Janet Conner, *Writing Down Your Soul*

Dreama Davidson, Vyb, Creative Director/Choreographer

Bud Fultz, Author

James Hammond

Bernard "BK" Jackson

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### **Hillsborough County Public Schools**

Jacqueline Haynes, Principal, Blake High School

Van Ayres, Assistant Principal, Curriculum

Kenneth Muldrow, School Intervention Specialist

Leah Kline, Title I Resource Teacher and Specialist

Carol Sivard, Media Specialist

Regina Jackson Underwood, Bookkeeper II

Claudette Reid, Guidance Department Head

Blake High School Students

Larry Plank, Secondary Science Supervisor

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### **Theme Books:**

*Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman

*Tribes* by Seth Godin

*Please Understand Me* by Keirseay and Bates

# About the Principal's Special Forces Team

This ambitious youth-driven effort, the first of its kind, is based on Newbery Medal winner Paul Fleischman's novel *Seedfolks* where a junk-strewn city lot is transformed into an urban garden, a process that transforms the gardeners' lives as well. In similar fashion, approximately one hundred high achieving upperclassmen pair with one hundred underclassmen to create a new more academic-focused culture — a garden of their own making. PSFT 2008-09

*The project wasn't just about getting a higher score on the FCAT. It's about purpose. It's about finding a purpose and direction in life. Finding the desire to make something great of oneself and one's community and environment. It's about helping provide a sense of direction to the students and encourage a focus towards an enriching life. Enriching not only to themselves, but also to everything that surrounds them. It wasn't just about school pride or the school grade either, it is about taking pride in our surroundings and recognizing our responsibility to nurture it. Feed it. Reinforce it. Acting as being part of it, not acquainted with it. —Francisco Valentin, Senior*



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