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# LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

**Melissa Lime**



**It's all about Relationships: My Leadership Journey with Freedom Crossing Academy**



The Worthy Educator

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## TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

### It's all about Relationships: My Leadership Journey with Freedom Crossing Academy

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Freedom Crossing Academy (FCA), home of the Falcons, is celebrating its seventh year in St. Johns County, Florida. St. Johns County School District has an outstanding reputation for academic excellence and commitment to character development, consistently recognized as one of Florida's top-performing school districts, earning an "A" district grade every year since 2004 and ranking second in the state for total accountability points in the 2023-2024 school year.



As a highly performing K-8 school, we are committed to academic excellence, character education, and cultivating a positive school culture, all of which align with the district's mission to inspire students to develop good character and a passion for lifelong learning. Since our founding, Freedom Crossing Academy has fostered a culture of leadership and innovation aligned to our school's mission and vision, empowering our students and staff to "Take Flight and Break Barriers." By upholding high expectations, FCA has earned an "A" rating since 2019, and has been recognized as a National Showcase School for Capturing Kids' Hearts, and a Florida PBIS Gold Model School for three consecutive years.

Freedom Crossing Academy is dedicated to cultivating a supportive and positive school culture where both students and staff are excited to come to school each day. At the heart of FCA's approach are three critical goals:

**1. Creating a Positive Learning Environment with Capturing Kids Hearts Best Practices**

We are intentional about utilizing Capturing Kids' Hearts best practices to foster positive relationships with our students, staff, and community. Capturing Kids Hearts best practices include greeting students at the door, sharing good news, developing classroom social contracts, and launching every class with a positive message or inspirational quote. We believe these strategies foster positive relationships and promote a positive school culture.

**2. Promoting Teacher Collaboration and Student Achievement with Professional Learning Communities**

Through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), we prioritize collaborative teamwork to improve student achievement. PLCs provide a framework for teachers to enhance their instructional practices, share strategies, and analyze student data to ensure mastery of essential standards. We are committed to this collaborative approach, which strengthens teaching and promotes continuous improvement.

**3. Fostering a Positive School Culture with PBIS Best Practices**

We are committed to implementing school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) best practices to create a positive, safe, and supportive learning environment. Our PBIS systems are aligned with our school mission and vision along with our Capturing Kids' Hearts and the CHARACTER COUNTS! education program. This alignment encourages leadership, outstanding character, and positive behavior outcomes.

These three goals drive our school-wide deliberate practice growth plan and school improvement plan initiatives. The FCA leadership team, comprised of administrators and teacher leaders, reviews feedback and survey data from students, staff, and parents to develop action steps aligned with each goal. The leadership team shares and discusses these goals with all stakeholders during School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings, Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, PBIS Team meetings, and monthly communications. We believe a shared commitment and understanding of FCA's goals are essential to fostering a positive culture across the entire school community.



## The “FCA Way”

Our traditions and approach are always student-centered, with a strong emphasis on building meaningful relationships. At the start of each school year, we create a staff social contract: a collaborative agreement developed by all staff members that outlines our shared commitments on how we interact with one another, our students and parents throughout the school year.

In the same way during the first weeks of school, our teachers prioritize building relationships and collaborating with their students to develop their classroom social contract. Students are empowered to take on various group roles throughout the year, such as classroom greeter, social contract rater, and classroom affirmer. Our middle school students also develop their leadership in the Leadworthy class and participate in classroom internships throughout the year.



During the hiring process, we prioritize selecting staff who align with our core values of building relationships, utilizing the PLC process, and implementing PBIS best practices. We are fortunate to have a highly dedicated and compassionate team who go above and beyond to build meaningful connections with our students and one other. From the classroom to faculty meetings, our culture is centered around affirmations and sharing “good things” across our campus.

New teachers are supported in a variety of ways including support from their grade-level professional learning communities, coaching cycles with instructional literacy coaches, professional learning from district curriculum specialists, and our New Teacher Cadre program. Our new staff are also paired with mentors to provide guidance and support for a successful transition into our school community.

We also intentionally establish school-wide systems that foster a family atmosphere by incorporating Capturing Kids' Hearts, CHARACTER COUNTS! and PBIS best practices into our daily routines and rituals. Our students are rewarded and recognized daily for adhering to the “FCA Way” school-wide behavior expectations through our LiveSchool/PBIS incentive program. The Freedom Crossing Academy MTSS Team (Multi-tiered System of Support) reviews discipline data on a weekly basis to measure the effectiveness of the school wide PBIS strategies and to identify students who may need additional supports and interventions. The PBIS team also identifies problem areas, brainstorms interventions, and acknowledges students exhibiting positive behavior. Our goal is to work closely with teachers, students, and families to create individualized targeted interventions to help our students succeed in the classroom.

*“I lead by example. It’s all about relationships! I continue to closely align with the mission and vision at Freedom Crossing Academy, rooted in servant leadership to serve and empower the community, build strong relationships, and create an environment where everyone can thrive.”*

In addition, our teachers collaborate weekly in their professional learning communities to develop a shared understanding of the curriculum, design common assessments, and analyze formative assessment data to inform instruction. By working together and taking shared ownership of student learning, each teacher ensures every student receives the support and resources needed to reach their full potential. Our teachers are dedicated to the PLC process and Four Questions, creating daily intervention and enrichment opportunities for our students. Through daily “Nest” sessions, our elementary students are grouped according to formative assessment data and receive targeted interventions and enrichment that align with the essential curriculum. These interventions and enrichment opportunities ensure that each student's unique needs are addressed.

## Community at our Core

At Freedom Crossing Academy, our families and community partners play a vital role in supporting the initiatives and programs that contribute to the success of our school. FCA’s Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) is a cornerstone of our school culture, offering support for a variety of events and initiatives that enhance the educational experience for both students and staff.

The PTO’s contributions are numerous and impactful, ranging from organizing staff appreciation events to coordinating school-wide PBIS incentives and fundraising efforts for new technology and school improvements. They organize monthly themed luncheons, supports our PBIS/LiveSchool incentive program, provide the Sunshine Cart with snacks and drinks for our teachers, and support numerous classroom donations.



Our PTO's involvement goes beyond daily activities, playing a pivotal role in organizing large-scale events that bring the entire school community together. One such event is *Rock Your School Day*, a global educational movement that encourages educators to create engaging and rigorous lessons. This event has become a tradition at Freedom Crossing Academy, with school-wide thematic units, classroom transformations, STEM projects, assemblies, and experiences all centered around a shared theme.

This year, our teachers truly exceeded expectations by creating hands-on and highly engaging learning experiences based on the theme, "WILD About FCA." Students participated in interactive science presentations, project-based learning activities, and a range of exciting lessons that aligned with essential science standards. Our students also participated in several highly engaging in-house field study experiences sponsored by our PTO. These educational programs brought science to life and supported our PBIS

program. The day was filled with memorial moments that sparked curiosity and excitement for learning.

Rock Your School Day in-house activities included:

**Jacksonville Museum of Science and History (MOSH) Reptiles on the Road** - Our Middle school science classes, along with 4th and 5th graders, enjoyed a live, up-close experience with reptiles, as part of a PBIS/LiveSchool incentive.

**Jacksonville Zoo Educational Outreach Program** - The top three Boosterthon classes from K-5, as well as middle school science classes, received an exclusive presentation from experts at the Jacksonville Zoo. Students learned fascinating facts about Florida wildlife and enjoyed up close animal encounters.

**Scientist in Every Florida School** - All students took part in a series of engaging virtual Zoom presentations from scientists, each focused-on topics aligned with their grade-level standards. Students enjoyed presentations with the Sea Turtle Hospital and a paleontologist who studies frog fossils from around the world.

In addition to these highly engaging presentations, our PTO families transformed the school campus with animal themed door decorations, balloon arches, and hallway transformations. With their support, we created an unforgettable learning environment for our students in the classroom and throughout the entire campus! Through events like *Rock Your School Day*, our amazing PTO helps strengthen our school community and enrich the learning experiences for all students.

### The FCA Leadership Journey

St. Johns County is one of the fastest-growing communities in the state, and to keep up with this growth, the district is planning to open five new schools over the next five years. Since opening in the fall of 2018, Freedom Crossing Academy continually adapts to the challenges that come with our rapid growth and success. Starting with 1,008 students and 105 staff members, we have expanded to 1,967 students and 203 staff members (114 instructional, 5 administrative).

Through it all, we focus on maintaining a family-oriented, supportive learning environment where every student feels connected, valued, and engaged.

When FCA opened, I served as the assistant principal, and I participated in developing the school's vision and mission. From the beginning, I ensured that these core values were embedded into our daily practices and culture, emphasizing the importance of relationships and community partnerships. I believe servant leadership is about prioritizing the needs of others, and I have carried this mindset forward in my current role as principal. We work diligently to break down barriers and empower both students and staff to create a positive school culture where everyone is encouraged to reach their highest potential.



Now serving as FCA principal, I lead by example. It's all about relationships! I continue to closely align with the mission and vision at Freedom Crossing Academy, rooted in servant leadership to serve and empower the community, build strong relationships, and create an environment where everyone can thrive. I place a strong emphasis on fostering a culture of trust, respect, and open communication, so that students feel connected and supported by both their peers and trusted adults. I also strive to maintain a school culture where students and staff look forward to coming to school every day. Parents and guests frequently comment that there is something special about the atmosphere at FCA when they walk through our doors. This positive, family-oriented environment is central to our strong sense of community. It is incredibly rewarding to develop a shared vision for student engagement and achievement and for the community to come together to support these goals. Everyone is deeply invested in our students' success.



### A Bright Future

As we strengthen our connection with the community, we are committed to cultivating deeper relationships and traditions among our families. By focusing on the whole child we ensure that our students receive the necessary opportunities and supports to promote their emotional well-being and academic success. One of the exciting new initiatives we are implementing this year is Sources of Strength, a proven, evidence-based prevention program successfully used in high schools throughout St. Johns County. Sources of Strength empowers students to utilize peer social networks to promote positive behaviors and shift away from unhealthy norms. Our goal is to train middle school students as leaders who can influence their peers in a positive direction, fostering healthier social norms and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. This initiative will contribute to creating a more connected and supportive school environment while strengthening relationships between students and caring adults. We have already trained more than fifty student leaders who will help spread this important message and drive lasting positive change. We plan to host a Sources of Strength Family Night that will focus on building resiliency and sharing valuable resources with our families.

We are excited to expand on these initiatives with the goal of enhancing school culture, extending Sources of Strength to support our teachers' mental well-being, incorporating an "upstream approach" to help manage stressful times. The focus is on eight protective factors: family support, positive friendships, mentors, healthy activities, generosity, spirituality, mental health, and physical health. Committed to ensuring that our staff and students feel connected, supported, and empowered through strong, meaningful relationships, we look forward to the continued growth and success of our school community as we work together to inspire and support each child on their journey.



*Melissa Lime is a St. Augustine native honored to serve as the Principal at Freedom Crossing Academy. Her leadership philosophy and core beliefs are rooted in fostering positive and trusting relationships with students, their families and the community. As a champion for all students, she is passionate about creating a positive school culture where everyone feels valued, supported, and empowered to achieve success.* [in](#) [X](#) [✉](#)

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at [theworthyeducator.com/journal](http://theworthyeducator.com/journal).