Everything Weddle Elementary teachers need to know is contained in binders they keep handy in their desk drawers. These “data books” are bulging with information about each and every student – their strengths and weaknesses, their academic growth and goals.

The binders are not mere grading books, but working documents created so that teachers can use student data to design targeted interventions and create strategic groupings of students.

“The data book is huge,” says Principal Samantha Ragaisis. “It really becomes the teacher’s bible for what direction they’re going to take each child.”

That seriousness of purpose is part of the culture at Weddle, where teachers pride themselves on getting rid of “fluff” in the curriculum and focusing on achievement.

“In my classroom, I think of the academic purpose of every activity, and if there isn’t a good reason to do it, I don’t do it,” says Stephanie Makjavich, a 2nd grade teacher.

Ragaisis says a trip several years ago to visit a successful school in Kennewick, Washington, helped galvanize the staff, who realized excellence was within reach despite the challenges faced by their students (8 out of 10 are economically disadvantaged). The Weddle staff raised the bar for themselves and their students.

“We realized we needed to be academically focused if we were going to get these kids into college,” Ragaisis says. “I’m not a fluff person. We don’t have time to color pictures of George Washington... These kids need real skills.”

The zero-fluff approach doesn’t mean the school isn’t fun. Weddle is big on positive reinforcement, such as ice cream parties for perfect attendance and special dog tags students wear when they do well on the state assessment. The school has a mascot called Wolfie – a costumed character that comes out on Fridays to interact with kids.

“We give every kind of reward we can to these kids,” says Ragaisis. “We do as much as we can to let them know what they’re doing makes a difference.”

At Weddle, more than a third of students are English Language Learners (ELL). The school is structured into two “strands” – Spanish literacy for native
Spanish-speakers, and English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL). Nearly all teachers are ESOL-endorsed.

In the Spanish strand, students learn both English and Spanish, “and they’re taught to draw upon what they know in one language to strengthen the other,” says Makjavich, who teaches in the bilingual program. “I really see that boosting my students’ achievement.”

A district literacy model has been a hit, providing a strong core structure, but allowing teachers flexibility.

“It’s a model that allows for creativity,” says Jenny Maguire, the instructional coach. “The teachers are given a concept or a skill to teach and can use any number of resources or books. We’re not tied to a curriculum where we’re going page by page, but rather creating curriculum that meets the needs of students... There’s always a standard that needs to be met, but you can teach it through any number of means.”

Despite being organized into separate strands, the staff is unified, working together in professional learning communities. An instructional coach provides opportunities for teachers to share ideas and collaborate to improve their instructional practices.

“We talk about how our students are performing - pull in our test scores, and the things we’re doing to help the students succeed where they’re having difficulty,” says 4th grade teacher Kristen Sime.

Recently, for example, the 4th grade team has focused on improving student writing, meeting weekly to pore over assessment strands that show how students are doing on specific skills, such as sentence fluency or conventions. “We’re able to brainstorm as a team, and having that support makes a huge difference,” Sime says.

The school prides itself on knowing students. The school teaches “Life skills” – 17 values such as integrity, perseverance, and courage. Starting this school year, students in grades 3-5 are “buddied up” with faculty or staff mentors.

“We wanted to connect with students beyond the classroom,” says Maguire. “We really try to teach students that who they are on the inside matters as much as their academics. Our students feel valued as people and not just lost in the shuffle.”

Data Driven

Student data is used to design targeted interventions for students. “Data books” contain information about each and every student -- their strengths, weaknesses, academic growth, and goals.