

Chesterfield Elementary School

Grades K–5, Public/Suburban • Chesterfield, Missouri • Rockwood School District

Modeling Democracy: Voice and Choice

How can a 50-minute bus ride to school improve reading? Just ask 40 enthusiastic youngsters at Chesterfield Elementary School who have shown a dramatic increase in reading power. When students from inner city St. Louis opted to attend suburban Chesterfield through a voluntary inter-district choice program, assistant principal Sharon O'Day used her ingenuity to transform their traveling time into instructional time. Now, thanks to a grant, the Riding-to-Read program is in full swing, and riders enjoy interesting books and cassette tapes during the trip. "I've been here since second grade," says

superintendent Craig Larson says, "The whole theme of student voice is ingrained at Chesterfield. This is the biggest change in an elementary school I've ever seen." The passion for student autonomy comes from the school's vibrant principal, Jill Ramsey. She has made a concerted effort to help staff, parents, and community members understand the correlation between student autonomy and personal and academic achievement. Wisely, she has provided adequate professional training for her teachers so that they can implement the concepts successfully.

A visit to this sunny school shows democracy in action as the students thoughtfully become the architects of their own education. Class meetings serve as a common ground where they decide norms for student behavior and consequences for breaching those norms. Also, these meetings provide forums to discuss character traits, resolve conflicts, and make decisions regarding curriculum. Disciplinary incidents become learning opportunities, because students must reflect on poor choices made and then discuss possible alternatives via a Think Sheet.

The school's many opportunities for cross-age tutoring and cooperative learning enhance the students' ability to work together. Each class is paired with a buddy class of a different grade for specific activities. For example, first and fourth graders teamed up last year to design a T-shirt for a young cancer victim who is the brother of a fourth grader. "Walking in the shoes of another person" forms the basis for exploration of many challenging social issues, such as the early settlers' treatment of the Native Americans. In another vein, races in physical education lose their competitive nature as students, working in pairs, try the indoor mile. When one teammate tires, he (she)



comes to the center, and the buddy runs. Students collaborate in math classes on a Math Treasure Hunt, and students and staff work together to create an outdoor Hope Garden as a means of showing support and encouragement to staff members who are battling cancer. Just as the school song states, *Chesterfield is a great place to grow*, and the diversity of activities in the classes enables students to learn from one another.

Voice and choice has had a positive impact on Chesterfield's nine core values: respect, responsibility, caring, integrity, patience, cooperation, courage, self-control, and perseverance. Fourth grader Kylie sums up the spirit of the school: "We have a choice, and it kind of feels like a family because we take care of each other and help each other."

REFERENCE

Caring School Community. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center. Web site: www.devstu.org/lsc.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Chesterfield

- High degree of satisfaction with school climate in Caring School Community Surveys of students, staff, and parents
- Consistently high student performance in the Missouri Assessment Program and Stanford 10 Achievement Tests
- Decrease of 42 percent in rate of disciplinary incidents over the last two years

Jill Ramsey, Principal

fourth grader Keith, "and I've learned a lot." A bonus: bus discipline problems are greatly reduced.

Chesterfield Elementary School prides itself on the many novel approaches it has used to promote character education. Part of the Rockwood School District, which was a 2006 National District of Character, Chesterfield shares the district's nine ethical values and also embraces the tenets of the Caring School Community. However, it is the school's emphasis on "voice and choice" that has served as its distinctive focus. School