

Heron Creek Middle School

Grades 6–8, Public/Suburban • North Port, Florida • Sarasota County Public Schools

Celebrating Diversity in Diverse Ways

The welcome sign at Heron Creek Middle School in North Port, Florida, captures the democratic spirit of the school: the word *welcome* is written in 14 different languages. Dynamic former principal Scott Wilson, who took the reins in 2002 of a newly created middle school that was housed in the district's high school its first year, knows that his staff still faces many instructional hurdles. More than 20 languages other than English are spoken at home, 40 percent of the student body is on free or reduced lunch, and 22.5 percent of the students receive special education services. Yet, despite these seemingly insurmountable



from Ruby Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and in practicing the Kagan cooperative learning strategies. During the year before the new school opened, the staff researched character education initiatives and chose the Community of Caring model; professional training helped the teachers in implementing its tenets from the outset.

The vision of honoring diversity continues today and has provided the philosophical framework for many of Heron Creek's successful initiatives. Inclusion is the key word: opportunities abound for learners of all levels within the diversified classrooms. Students wishing to participate in a more demanding academic curriculum may choose the Challenge program (a 2006 Promising Practice) with its higher expectations and more difficult assignments. Struggling students benefit from the school's No Failure Policy in which students retake tests and redo assignments until they reach the mastery level. Teachers as well as special groups, such as the Grandmothers Club, Big Brothers/Sisters, and members of the African-American and Latino communities, voluntarily provide both tutoring and mentoring. Committed to inclusion of special education students, band director Colleen Glenney started a music integration program that has mainstream band

students mentoring and tutoring special needs students on a weekly basis.

Connecting the school with its families and the greater community is central to the mission of Heron Creek. Every year the school hosts a Global Family Reunion that honors many cultures via presentations in art, dance, music, and food; the event has drawn a crowd of over 1,200. Among other programs designed to involve parents and community are the Parent University that introduces parents to the academic demands on their children and a Diversity Forum in which community leaders address students and facilitate breakout sessions.

Wilson, as well as many parents and community members, praises the extraordinary efforts of the caring Heron Creek staff. Fire Chief William Taaffe, who has been actively involved in many of the school's projects, sums up the town's feeling toward its teachers: "I don't think there's anything they wouldn't do for a student."

REFERENCES

Community of Caring. Salt Lake City, UT: National Center for Community of Caring. Web site: www.communityofcaring.org.

Kagan Cooperative Learning Model. San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. Web site: www.kaganonline.com.

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CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Heron Creek

- "A" rating in 2005 from the State of Florida for significant learning gains
- Dramatic decrease in at-risk behavior, according to 2006 survey conducted by University of Southern Florida
- 2006 *Community of Caring* National Vanguard Award: Heron Creek chosen from 1,100 schools in the United States and Canada as a national model

Scott A. Wilson, Former Principal

obstacles, Heron Creek has managed to earn an "A" rating from the Florida Department of Education and is recognized as a leader in achieving gains in student learning.

What is the secret of this alchemy? Wilson and his staff purposely set out "to create a school culture where diversity would be celebrated and students would be successful." To help the faculty meet the needs of these students, everyone received training in teaching English as a Second Language, in exploring techniques