

## Westminster East Middle School

Grades 6–8, Public/Suburban • Westminster, Maryland • Carroll County Public Schools

### Transforming School Culture

Although the school day at Westminster East Middle School in Carroll County, Maryland does not officially begin until 7:40 a.m., a small group of enthusiastic boys gathers in the lobby at 7:00. Ready to greet students and teachers with a smile and to open the doors for them, these ambassadors of good will have voluntarily assumed this duty, and certainly the administration has not discouraged them. This caring behavior is not unusual in this remarkable middle school that just five years ago had “a reputation of being one of the worst” of the county’s nine middle schools, according to principal Jeffrey Alisauckas. East Middle’s story is one of the transformative power of character education.

In just five years, a dedicated group of administrators and teachers have completely changed the culture of the school. The school motto, *Bulldogs Rule with Respect, Responsibility, and Relationships*, has become the foundation of a home-grown character education program that reinforces Carroll County’s ethical values. Much research, committee discussion, and input from parents and community preceded the development of the school’s character initiative, which combines elements of other programs. For example, East Middle uses Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to help manage data, Project Wisdom to select quotes for each day, Mix It Up at Lunch Day to break down social barriers, and Capturing Kids’ Hearts to inspire positive teacher–student interactions. Initially encountering some staff resistance, the school has

thoughtfully used data and results to make believers out of the wary. “Go slow to go fast” is how Alisauckas describes the process. He adds, “As people see the benefits, they move. Through data we move resisters. Senior faculty members say kids are different now.”

A visitor can see how “kids are different now.” Social contracts and class meetings provide students with opportunities to discuss their concerns and determine goals. An active student government makes suggestions to the administration and effects positive change.

In meeting the needs of its most vulnerable and at-risk students, East Middle has done exemplary work. The school, which houses all of Carroll County’s emotionally disturbed students in the BEST program, mainstreams 90 percent of these youngsters into regular education classes after an initial stay in a self-contained classroom. East Middle has developed an equally successful pyramid of interventions for students who are at risk of eventually dropping out of school. Mentoring, individualized student mapping with set goals, and differentiated instruction in a short-term Connections class are among the diverse strategies that have brought significant success.

Westminster’s decisions are data



#### CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Westminster East

- Substantial drop in suspensions over the last two years
- Significant decline in disciplinary referrals and an improved attendance rate
- Overall improvement in Maryland School Assessment scores

Jeffrey J. Alisauckas, Principal

driven; the administration and staff excel at examining academic, behavioral, and attitudinal data to frame new programs. They also excel in demonstrating an important quality: caring. When asked to reveal the secret of East Middle’s extraordinary transformation, assistant principal and Multicultural Committee chair Philip Popielski replies, “Because people care. Kids care. Parents care.”

#### REFERENCES

*Capturing Kids’ Hearts*. College Station, TX: The Flippen Group. Web site: [www.capturingkidshearts.com/education/index.html](http://www.capturingkidshearts.com/education/index.html).

*Mix It Up at Lunch Day*. Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center. Web site: [www.tolerance.org/teens](http://www.tolerance.org/teens).

*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)*. PBIS Maryland. Web site: [www.pbismaryland.org](http://www.pbismaryland.org).

*Project Wisdom*. Bellaire, TX: Project Wisdom, Inc. Web site: [www.projectwisdom.com](http://www.projectwisdom.com).

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Jeffrey J. Alisauckas, Principal  
Westminster East Middle School  
121 Longwell Avenue  
Westminster, MD 21157

Telephone: (410) 751-3656

E-mail: [jjalisa@k12.carr.org](mailto:jjalisa@k12.carr.org)

Web site: [www.carrollk12.org/ems](http://www.carrollk12.org/ems)