

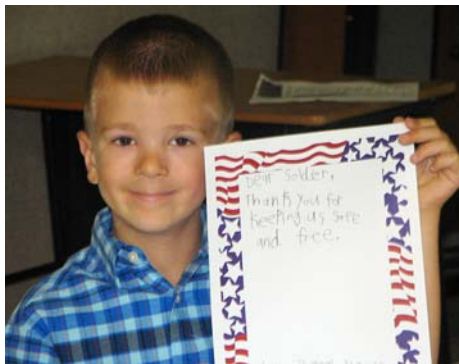
Westwood Elementary School

Grades PreK–3, Public/Suburban • Friendswood, Texas • Friendswood Independent School District

Children Teaching Parents

Parents often jest that a role reversal has taken place in Friendswood, Texas. In the car, on the soccer field, and in the grocery line, it is children, not parents, who are uttering lines such as “Did you make a wise choice?” and “Remember to be courteous.” The Character Counts framework at Westwood Elementary School has proved to be such a hit that the students are now its most vocal champions. And the parents are enjoying every moment of instruction by their enthusiastic little teachers.

Fascination with good character has not always been the case at Westwood. The years 1999 through 2003 brought



out that by revisiting the pillars of character and setting them firmly as the new foundation, “the staff was on the road to stability, healing, and success for all.”

Westwood today is a happy place, a utopia in which teachers, students, parents, and community play pivotal roles in fulfilling the school’s vision: *Dynamically shaping hearts and minds for the future.*

From its first tangible sign—the six pillars lining the entrance walkway of the school—to the courteous and caring behavior of the students, who have truly internalized the values, character education flourishes here. Guided by counselor Barbara Gruener, who is also a certified Character Counts trainer, Westwood’s program involves creative integration into the curriculum and interactive character lessons that utilize books, puppets, music, art, writing, and role-playing. Students feel especially proud of being able to “help others” through Westwood’s myriad service projects.

In addition to a summer retreat at which the entire faculty receives character training, many have attended sessions on Capturing Kids’ Hearts and have trained the rest of the staff. Lee Whitlock, the assistant principal, states, “Our school acts like a faith-based agency. We share the leadership, and we talk openly about goals and mission. The whole school is involved, not just a few.” Thad Roher, the

district director of elementary education, comments, “Whatever the district topic is, the thought process of Westwood teachers is to turn the discussion to how can we better integrate character education into the curriculum. Nothing at Westwood is isolated; everything is integrated.”

Students are not the only ones who are training parents; the school has a well-planned program to involve parents, starting with a Meet and Greet in August at which parents and children meet their teachers and initiate their relationship. Get-togethers such as Donuts with Dudes and Muffins with M’Lady add a special touch to parent/child relationships. Volunteerism is a powerful force at Westwood; the school averages 1,025 volunteer hours a month on the part of parents, grandparents, and retirees, who give assistance in everything from paper cutting and shelving of library books to tutoring of young learners. Grandparent Gene Ellen Smith adds, “The important lesson here is that when children see us volunteer, they learn to be volunteers.” Apparently, the little ones are not the only ones who want to show the world that “character counts.”

REFERENCES

Capturing Kids’ Hearts. College Station, TX: The Flippen Group. Web site: www.capturingkidshearts.com/education/index.html.

CHARACTER COUNTS! Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: www.charactercounts.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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CHARACTER EDUCATION WORKS AT Westwood

- Success in meeting our Adequate Yearly Progress goals
- Increase in percentage of Hispanic students with a passing score on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), from 70 percent in 2003 to 89 percent in 2006; increase in percentage of economically disadvantaged students with a passing score, from 69 percent (2003) to 75 percent (2006)
- Decrease of 57 percent in office referrals from 2003 to 2006

Lynn Hobratchk, Principal

many difficult adjustments: three leadership changes, shifting demographics, increasing disciplinary problems, and declining achievement. When the new leadership team assumed command in 2004, one of its first steps was to set a new direction for the school. At a summer retreat, the staff chose to strengthen the practice of Character Counts which had been introduced to the district in 2001. Principal Lynn Hobratchk points