

Newport Mill Middle School

A Cinderella Story: The Spirit of Excellence

Everyone loves a Cinderella story. When Newport Mill Middle School opened its doors in 2002, folks wondered how students would fare in a school located in the section of Montgomery County, Maryland, that is most affected by poverty, mobility, and language diversity. The verdict is in: One of the highest-performing middle schools in the county, Newport Mill has demonstrated the remarkable power of the Spirit of Excellence.

Nelson McLeod likes a challenge. When he heard that his first principalship would be of a soon-to-be-opened middle school with students of below-grade achievement, he concentrated not on potential problems but on ways to achieve excellence. McLeod says, “Character education is a wonderful opportunity to support student achievement and to develop a positive and rewarding school culture. One of our school goals from the beginning was to connect with the community.”

And Newport Mill did indeed connect. Conversations with teachers, students, and parents consistently attribute the school’s reputation for excellence to being “connected” and “feeling like a family.” Administrative school assistant Dave Dove says, “It’s about making connections with the kids, and that’s what we do at Newport Mill.” Seventh grader Michelle agrees: “Our school is like a big community, and all of us try to help each other.” Media specialist and parent Kathy Stouffer observes, “The teachers really care about the students and the success of each individual student.” Guidance counselor Ellen Turverey, a coordinator of the Character Education Committee, sums up the special quality of Newport Mill: “It’s a peaceful,

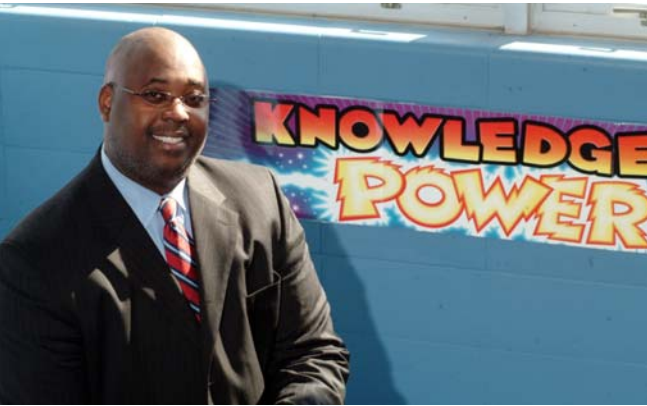
safe, and fun place to be, where there is a lot of love for learning and for one another.”

McLeod, a charismatic and imaginative leader, has been the recipient of three prestigious awards for his work in creating an excellent educational program and environment: *The Washington Post* Distinguished Educational Leadership Award for Montgomery County (2006), the Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals’ Middle School Principal of the Year Award (2007), and the Maryland State Department of Education’s Educator Excellence Award for minority student achievement (2007). Despite all these accolades, McLeod shrugs off his awards and gives high marks to his committed faculty and supportive parents for making his vision of excellence a reality.

Tiger Pride: Fueling the Character Education Initiative

From the school’s beginning, *Tiger Pride*—with its emphasis on the five traits of respect, responsibility, caring, sportsmanship, and effort—has been the slogan that fuels the character education program. Since low test scores, concerns about student behavior, and lack of connection among stakeholders seemed to beset middle schools in the area, the new school intentionally set out to develop a comprehensive program that would address these issues. Counselor Tim Rossini, another coordinator of the Character Education Committee, observes how the school’s emphasis on respect and accountability has aided instruction: “The culture of the school is structured in a way that helps to eliminate barriers to learning, so that teachers can teach.” Three motivational messages, which are prominently displayed in the school, epitomize its positive philosophy: *This is important*, *You can do it*, and *I won’t give up on you*.

Staff members are so committed to the philosophy of “not giving up” on their students that they call many students in the morning before school to encourage them to attend. To accommodate the schedules of parents with early-shift work, a school



Newport Mill's dynamic principal, Nelson McLeod

employee supervises at least 10 students who arrive at the building at 6:15 a.m. Eighth grader Jocelyn echoes the views of both students and parents when she says, "It's a nice environment, and the teachers are always willing to help you. You can go to them about things outside of school as well as things about school."

Building on the Baldrige Framework

If Newport Mill wanted its students to be active learners, it reasoned that its faculty must also assume that role. In 2003 the school implemented the Baldrige School Improvement process and strove to abide by its emphasis on student-centered education, listening to all voices, and using performance data to guide improvement. When a student survey indicated that teasing was an issue, the school instituted its first Peer Leadership program for 45 members. However, when an end-of-the-year survey indicated a need for all students to be sensitized, the school went into action. The counselors devised a creative How to Be an Ally program of structured lessons on bullying and teasing. All teachers receive full-day training on these lessons, which they in turn teach to the entire student body in small classes. Listening to the student voice has worked, and current surveys indicate that bullying and teasing have greatly decreased. Parent and PTA treasurer Emily Ellenbogen says, "The focus on bullying and teasing is really important to me as a parent, and the fact that the school feels this is as important as academics is very reassuring, because it reinforces the idea of caring about each other, which is definitely needed in today's world."

A centerpiece of the Newport Mill character education program is the Character in Action lessons that reach the entire school once a week through the closed-circuit television system. Staff members, under the direction of the school's guidance team, perform

open-ended skits that deal with a monthly value that is being highlighted. Although the entire student body views the same presentation, individual teachers are responsible for guiding the follow-up discussion and linking the topic to their own curriculum.

As part of the staff development program, teachers are reading *Teaching with Love and Logic* to examine successful strategies for engaging students in a caring way. Teachers have very high expectations of their students, and these expectations are consistently expressed through the use of respectful and encouraging language. In fact, at the beginning of summer vacation, seventh grader Mayra revealed how sad she was not to still be in school: "I love learning at Newport Mill. The teachers help you a lot."

McLeod, who has had experience in human resources, makes certain that all new hires are both caring and knowledgeable. Using hypothetical scenarios, he manages to get a good read on the way potential staff members will treat students. McLeod readily shares his own personal story, which has shaped his philosophy: As a child, he was overweight and

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Newport Mill Middle School:

- In the past year, there was a 39 percent decrease in disciplinary referrals and a 50 percent decrease in suspensions.
- The My Voice Survey of students in December 2006 indicates that 89 percent value good grades and 75 percent have changed the way they treat people since the beginning of the school year.
- Math scores on the Maryland School Assessment soared, with 49.6 percent of students proficient in 2004 and 70.5 percent proficient in 2006.
- Reading scores also increased, with 60.3 percent of students proficient in 2004 and 67.2 percent proficient in 2006.
- 67.3 percent of African-American students scored proficient in math in 2006, up from 34.1 percent in 2004.
- 60.3 percent of Hispanic students scored proficient in math in 2006, up from 38.2 percent in 2004.

stuttered. Once when asked to read aloud in middle school, he froze, and the teacher responded by calling him “stupid.” Vowing that such an experience would never happen to any Newport Mill student, he works with his staff to make the school an inviting place where children with problems “will always have someone to go to.” Conversations with the student body indicate that this goal has been fulfilled. Eighth grader Dominic comments on the school’s democratic spirit: “Newport Mill helps everyone. It doesn’t matter what is your race.”

A Challenging Academic Curriculum

Although Newport Mill accents caring, it does not in any way compromise the student’s responsibility to excel academically. A class at Newport Mill is a stimulating adventure in learning. Worksheets and busy work do not find their way into these energetic classrooms; in their stead are thought-provoking lessons in which students accept exciting challenges and explore new ideas. For example, a social studies class might consider explorers from the perspective of

both the conqueror and the conquered, or an English class might conjecture what a poem would say if it were written from a different viewpoint.

To meet the diverse learning styles of their students, teachers employ a variety of instructional strategies, such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, small-group activities, individual and group projects, literary circles, and individual reading and response. The school has adopted the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (MYP) approach that organizes lessons around essential questions and focuses on international understanding and critical thinking. English teacher Susan Reff finds “a significant link between the goals of MYP and those of character education.”

Newport Mill has done remarkable work in narrowing the “achievement gap.” Since earlier test performance indicated a weakness in mathematics, all students receive a 90-minute period in that subject daily. Almost 68 percent of all current eighth graders are taking either Algebra 1 or an even higher-level math course. What is noteworthy is that the minority enrollment mirrors this trend: 68 percent of African-Americans and 60 percent of Hispanics take algebra or higher math. (In the Montgomery County Public Schools district as a whole, the corresponding figures for these two groups are 44 percent and 45 percent, respectively.) Not only do the students at Newport Mill tend to take more difficult courses, but there have been amazing improvements in scores on the Maryland School Assessment: Only 34.1 percent of African-American students were proficient in math in 2004, but that figure rose to 67.3 percent in 2006; among Hispanic students, the level of proficiency increased from 38.2 percent to 60.3 percent in the same period.

Connecting School to Families in Novel Ways

The intentional goal of connecting the school to families is evident in the high level of communication with parents, illustrated by daily e-mail messages that contain the school’s morning announcements and Sunday night phone calls outlining the activities of the week to come. Catherine Huntress-Reeve, the parent of an eighth grader, feels that Newport Mill is different from other schools, because it has made a conscious effort to be “family friendly and

PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS: Nelson McLeod

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *synergy* and *engaged*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: Take A Stand Tuesdays with student voices, video simulations, and Character In Action lessons

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: improvement in disciplinary statistics and school culture data

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: improved performance of all demographic subgroups on the Maryland School Assessment; report-card grades; student responses on the My Voice Survey, which indicate that they value good grades

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Character education is an opportunity to enhance the academic, personal, and social-emotional culture of a school. It should be a comprehensive program that involves all stakeholders (students, parents, staff, and community partners) and seeks their input for continuous improvement.*

welcoming.” All communications are issued in English and Spanish, with the capacity for translation into other languages when necessary.

McLeod says that Newport Mill listens to the needs of its parents and often takes a non-traditional approach to addressing their concerns. For example, when the parents indicated that they needed baby-sitting services in order to get to meetings, the school provided such a service; when the parents said they needed dinner, it furnished food. Sarah Patterson, Guidance Department chair and still another coordinator of the Character Education Committee, asserts, “We have built and will continue to build our program around the ever-changing strengths and needs of our students and community.”

Staff and parents listen to each other, and the administration regards feedback as a positive guide, not as criticism. “The level of communication flows easily,” states Kitty Hollister, PTA president. “The school is responsive to parent concerns in many ways.” Another parent, Susan Anderson, agrees: “We are seen as partners, and we feel respected, because concerns and questions are responded to quickly.” For example, when feedback indicated the need for parenting workshops, the Parent Empowerment program with its monthly parent workshops came into existence. Topics run the gamut, from techniques for responsible parenting to handling peer pressure and transitioning to high school. One mother of a seventh grader reveals how this program taught her new skills for dealing with her son, who had been experiencing difficulties. Through the parenting resources and the support of numerous adults at the school, the relationship of mother and son improved, and so did the son’s academic performance.

Next Steps for Character Education

Since Newport Mill has consistently used data and feedback to devise plans and revise its programs, it will use the Character Education Partnership site-visit report to determine its next steps. With an eye on developing service learning as the moral-action component of character education, the school intends to emphasize projects that help the oppressed, including those in other countries. Last year, a student-directed project in which Newport Mill sent 25 boxes of goods to the needy in

Swaziland received strong support. Teachers are already talking about projects that promote social justice and train students to be activists while reinforcing the curriculum.

Newport Mill has taken giant strides in meeting the academic, emotional, social, and personal needs of its diverse student body. By expanding its Character Education Committee to include more students, parents, and community members, the school hopes to widen its support base. When asked



Newport Mill teachers have high expectations.

what he wants his school to be like, McLeod, who never thinks small, says, “I would like it to be considered a character education *academy*, a model school that others can visit and see what can be done by believing in students and teaching them to believe in themselves.” In its sixth year of existence, Newport Middle School already appears to be fulfilling the American Dream.

REFERENCES

Baldrige in Education: The Road to Excellence. Sites in Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. Web site: www.baldrigeineducation.org.

Fay, J., and D. Funk. *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom.* Golden, CO: Love and Logic Press, Inc., 1995.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Nelson McLeod, Principal
Newport Mill Middle School
11311 Newport Mill Road
Kensington, MD 20895

Telephone: (301) 929-2244
E-mail: nelson_mcleod@mcpsmd.org
Web site: montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/newportmillms