

Skyview Elementary School

Grades PreK–5
Lizella, Georgia
Public/Suburban
Enrollment 789
Bibb County School District

Soaring with the SkyHawks

Although it opened only five years ago, Skyview Elementary School in scenic Lizella, Georgia, has already gained a reputation as an educational star. The Basic School philosophy with its focus on the four building blocks of community, curriculum, climate, and character provides Skyview with a sound framework, but it is the passion, dedication, and wonderful whimsy of its dedicated staff that has made this Title I school soar to great heights in academics and character.

Dynamic former principal Gail Gilbert has a knack for raising the test scores of students. She also has a gift for connecting with each one of them and a refreshing ability to “think out of the box” on ways to inspire them. All three talents come to the fore on Student Success Day, a highlight of Student Pride Week in October.

The festivities that mark the official opening of School Pride Week begin with a parade. First come the colorful floats designed by the class buddies; next is the Teacher of the Year, who serves as the Grand Marshal; then come the community partners, who lead the students in the parade.

All agree that the highlight of Student Pride Week is Student Success Day. Once the initial excitement dies down, there is silence as each grade anxiously awaits the principal’s signal to hold up its banner. A thunderous cheer follows the hoisting of each banner. The observer, of course, wonders what those banners could possibly say to elicit such joy. Unbelievably, what each grade is publicizing is the percentage of students who have passed

the state performance test, the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). Gilbert explains: “I think students should experience proper delight in their school’s achievement and status, and this is a great way to show it.” Creative perfectionist that she is, Gilbert set the stage long before the testing day, with her animated reading of Dr. Seuss’s *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day* to the children. In this hilarious tale, students in a zany school that prizes individuality are threatened with removal to antiseptic Flobbertown if they fail the required test. Although such dire consequences are never in store for the Skyview children, their “Hooray for Skyview” on Student Success Day carries the same exuberance as that which is expressed by the merry Diffendoofers in the book. The ceremony ends with jubilation as balloons in the school colors of red, white, and blue float up into the sky, informing the community of the school’s success.

Connecting to the Community

Parent Tammy Minton, who now works as the school secretary, chose to live in this area because of the warm experience she had in visiting the school. In fact, she was so impressed by the universal friendliness and courtesy of students and staff that she quietly asked a friend, “Where do they keep the bad kids?” Parent after parent interviewed said their children were so happy at school that they objected to staying home even when sick. Parent Barry Merritt, whose fifth-grade son fits into this category, says that “the boy has never been absent or tardy.” The irony is that Merritt initially was reluctant to have his son attend Skyview, “because it was three times as big as the previous school.” Merritt was just one of many parents who responded apprehensively to the opening of this school five years ago. In a major redistricting plan, the Bibb County School District had decided to close the revered Redding Elementary School and reassign its students to Skyview. Community members, many with parents and grandparents who had attended the older school, were not happy; some even filed a lawsuit to keep Redding open.



Skyview’s Teacher of the Year serves as Grand Marshal of the Pride Parade.

Luckily, Gilbert had learned much from her previous principalships. As the head of Minnie Burghard Elementary School, she experienced first-hand how an effective character education program could transform a low-performing school to one so effective that it became a 2001 National School of Character. A short one-year assignment at Morgan Magnet School had provided her and her staff with an opportunity to try out the Basic School philosophy. Basing his concept of a school of excellence on 20 years of research on educational practice, Dr. Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, advocated a comprehensive approach to education, marked by four “connections”: community, climate, curriculum, and character. Fortified with Boyer’s philosophy and a passion for character education, Gilbert and her hand-picked staff at Skyview began their journey.

In order to woo the community to accept the new school, Gilbert set out immediately to make the first “connection.” To give the new students a sense of ownership, she visited the classes at Redding School in May and let them select the school colors (red, white, and blue) and the school mascot (SkyHawk). After a gathering with the community “to address rumors and misconceptions,” the staff’s next move was to conduct home visits or make phone contact with every child and parent over the summer. A picnic on school grounds served as the official open house for parents, children, and staff. The Skyview staff, aware of the anxiety engendered by a move to a strange, new school, manned information booths, where they answered transportation questions, gave out carpool numbers, supplied schedules for after-school programs, and distributed school supplies. Skyview also planned occasions for staff bonding: a “get acquainted” staff meeting and visit to the new school while it was still under construction, a pool party that included spouses and children, workshops presented by the Basic School mentor, and pre-planning days. Skyview is an apt name for this school, which charged onward and upward with a mission “to create a culture of excellence.”

Connecting Character to the Curriculum

Gilbert’s comment, “We had a lot of relationship building in the first year,” underplays the gargantuan effort required in the early days. The community

connection is strong today because of a carefully planned structure. First of all, the student body is divided into a “family within a family” arrangement: Three PreK–5 families exist, each with classes of all grade levels, and every class is paired with a buddy class of a different grade within its family. In addition, the Character Design Team is kept busy in guiding the character development effort and in connecting the values to the curriculum. Music teacher Susan Mincey points out one of the strengths of Gilbert’s leadership: “Her philosophy is to give the teachers what they need and then get out of the way.”

A character education curriculum, written by the staff, provides a host of engaging character lessons as well as suggestions for journal topics, home activities, Web-site content, and service-learning projects. Each month the school is abuzz with talk of the Book of the Month, which serves as a common reading experience for students, staff, and parents. Lively discussions,

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Skyview Elementary School:

- Skyview exceeded the state performance on the 2006 Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in every grade and every subject (reading, math, science, social studies), with the exception of grade 3 reading, where it equaled the state performance.
- The percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standards on the CRCT increased by at least two percent each year (2003–05) over the baseline (2002) score of 89 percent.
- The implementation of the character education program merited a perfect score (5) in the 2006 assessment by the University of Georgia.
- The character education program, evaluated according to an eight-criterion rubric, received a “strong implementation” rating.
- The rate of disciplinary incidents has remained below the 2002 baseline, despite an increase in enrollment of 259 students and an increase of 14 percent in the number of free/reduced lunch recipients.
- Staff/parent/student survey data indicate that parents think students get an excellent education at Skyview, and that students are aware that adults care for them and speak to them politely.

written reflections, and artistic renditions show the impact of the selection on school life. For example, after the students completed *Mr. Lincoln's Way*, a story about a bully overcoming his prejudice when an African-American principal invited him to help attract birds to the school atrium, the students created their own aviary in the hallway, replete with trees and a variety of student-made birds.

Although Skyview does encourage its students to be proud of their performance on the state tests (results show a continuing increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state requirements), the emphasis is on developing self-motivated individuals who are “knowledgeable, responsible, and caring.” Clearly, a cornerstone of that goal is the Pride Folder maintained by every student in grades 2–5. The folder contains the student’s goals, reflections, and important achievements as well as the teacher’s Professional Education Dedication Statement. Skyview is both caring and creative in its efforts to address the needs of at-risk students, providing a STARS (Special Touches for At-Risk Students) mentoring program and Test Talk Time, one-on-one chats with the principal and assistant principal to encourage success.

PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Gail M. Gilbert

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *family and nurturing*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: Student Success Day, which shows student pride (an appropriate way to delight in a school’s achievement)

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: students consistently doing the right thing for its own sake (for example: a student returned a \$100 bill that she had found)

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: consistently high scores on the state CRCT

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Whatever you do, do it consistently and make it a school-wide effort. Look for opportunities to immerse and embed character in all key activities.*

Developing Student Leaders and Improving School Culture

Parent Lester Miller says, “It’s not enough to just get all A’s here. You have to be good, too.” It is obvious that the school agrees, for the Skyview Superior Award is given to students who combine all A’s with good citizenship. The school believes strongly in fostering student leadership, even training kindergarteners to assume roles of responsibility. Every class elects a representative to the Student Council, and students vote on both grade-level and school-wide service-learning projects. Student reflections on a service-learning project last year, the Race to the Lake, revealed how the project to clean up the play space at a local lake area affected them. Annie wrote that the project helped her develop “kindness, respect, and perseverance”; Taylor “felt good” by “helping the earth,” and Ariele “felt proud when the project was finished, ready for the next one to start.”

Life is never dull at Skyview, and it is never without the student voice. First-grade teacher Lisa Daniely emphasizes that the students, like the staff, feel a strong connection to the school: “The children have ownership. The staff takes ownership. This is our school.” In the student-run television broadcast, WSKY, announcers read the school announcements, lead the school in a character pledge, display the student character-related art of the day, and introduce birthday celebrants. Moreover, students may take on many interesting roles in other aspects of school life. They can voice an opinion at a class meeting, conduct an actual transaction at the Skyview Community Bank (sponsored by Bank of America), or function as a host or hostess in the cafeteria. A pilot project in which two students from each class set the table, welcome students, and keep a watchful eye on clean-up has proved to be highly successful, pleasing both teachers and students.

Connecting to Parents

From the first “hello” at the welcoming social, parents feel they are vital partners in their children’s education. The *SkyHawk Talk Newsletter* apprises parents of the latest events; a special Parent Character Corner provides ideas for parents to promote character at home. In addition, workshops help parents hone skills in raising children and

dealing with problems, and the Character Design Team elicits suggestions from parents on ways to improve character initiatives. Parent Tracy Taylor observes, “Everyone’s on a level playing field at parent meetings.” Taylor, who is delighted that her daughter applies “the manners she learned at Skyview” to other situations, continues, “They even help you to teach your child to be better in math.” Another parent, Mott Smith, observes that becoming part of the Skyview family also means learning to abide by the school rules. As a result of their relationship with the new school, Smith says, “Parents grew, children grew, and, as a community, we grew. This is still a community school.”

Parents have a high regard for the principal and the caring staff, who often attend the students’ activities outside of school to strengthen their bond with the children. Susan Middleton, a School Board member, states, “Gail Gilbert combines character education with a strong academic model. This is a model school.” Representatives from Mercer University and Macon State College agree, adding that they “love to place their student teachers at Skyview” because it provides them with an actual example of an ideal school. Student teacher Carolyn Garvin of Mercer University, who has never had “a negative assessment” while being observed here, is enthusiastic about her experience: “The principal sets the positive tone for the school.”

The school also teams with local community and civic organizations on projects and solicits local leaders to share their careers and life experiences with the children. A meeting with faith-based community leaders generated the plan for a community park/playground that is now being developed.

Soaring into the Future

Gilbert, as the principal of two schools that have achieved National School of Character status, has much to offer schools desirous of implementing or improving a character education program. A seasoned presenter who served as a content faculty member at several character education institutes sponsored by the Idaho State Department of Education and also facilitated character education sessions in Missouri and Virginia, she looks forward to the new outreach role that Skyview will play in bringing the message to others.

Skyview has already made a name for itself on both the state and national levels. *Georgia Family* magazine chose the school for its Spotlight on Education feature in 2004, since it was already shaping up to be “one of the highest-performing schools in Bibb County” because of the high percentage of students meeting or exceeding reading and math standards on the CRCT. A 2006 study by Patricia Davenport and Terri Smith, *Are We There Yet? Continuing to Close the Achievement Gap*, also accented the school’s continued strong performance on standardized tests.

Ask the staff and students at Skyview about the school’s accolades, however, and you will find them to be characteristically modest. Skyview considers itself, first and foremost, to be a school of character. It should come as no surprise that its students perform well academically, because that is what students strive to do in a culture of excellence. After all, students who choose powerful, legendary birds as their mascot have high expectations.

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PreK students learn real-life lessons as they make deposits at the Skyview Community Bank.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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