

Alta S. Leary Elementary School

Grades PreK-5 • Public/Suburban • Warminster, Pennsylvania • Centennial School District

Changing Hearts and Minds

“Some schools just want to change academics. Leary does that, but, more importantly, it changes hearts.” This observation, made by Arlene McCloskey, a parent of quadruplets and an older son at Alta S. Leary Elementary School, sums up the extraordinary effect of this neighborhood school, located in Warminster, a suburb of Philadelphia. Designated a 2007–08 *No Place for Hate* School by the Anti-Defamation League, Leary has a long tradition of fostering brotherly love. For over 14 years, its conflict resolution and peacemaking programs have been models for embracing diversity.

Occupying a prominent spot in the character-themed foyer is the *No Place for Hate* Promise that begins *I promise to do my best to treat everyone fairly. I promise to do my best to be kind to everyone—even if they are not like me.* Carrying out the focus on character are six large pillars that flank the front office: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. An impressive character tree mural, photos of students exhibiting the pillars, an Empty Bowls exhibit that showcases student art work that collected over \$3,000 for the Philabundance Project—these are just a few of the colorful displays that show that character building is serious business at Alta Leary. But the most impressive proof is in the students’ behavior—toward the teachers, toward the support staff, toward one another. The Character Counts pillars have become such a part of Leary culture that first-grade teacher Lisa Stecklein reports that one of her little ones, on observing a peer being disrespectful, admonished him, “That’s not very pillar-like.”

The principal, teachers, parents, and students work together in fulfilling the second part of the *No hate* promise: *Everyone should be able to feel safe and happy at school... no place for hate.* In a recent student climate survey given to the upper grades, 174 of the 175

participants said they were respected at school, and 170 of 174 said that their teacher thought they would be successful. High teacher expectations and a commitment to effective teaching have brought observable success. A school with its 9 percent special education population fully included, and 38 percent of its students receiving Title I services in reading and math, Leary has met AYP goals every year, and its scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) show consistent improvement. It is also a Pennsylvania Blue Ribbon School of Excellence.

The school has many comprehensive strategies to make certain that students understand, reflect on, and practice what it means to be a good person each day. Among these are class meetings, morning meetings, peer mediation, anti-bullying activities, and service projects. Leary is no place for the mindless distribution of copied worksheets; students work together, discussing and grappling with important issues in their classes. Methodologies differ, but there is always an emphasis on student engagement and the student voice. Leary pays close attention to individual differences and how children learn. For example, a Learning Styles survey given to all students helps teachers to use diverse approaches.

When Dr. Donna Dunar assumed the principalship two years ago, she first asked herself, “Whose school is this?” Her answer, “Not mine. It’s the community’s,” has resulted in a shared leadership design in which staff, parents, and students work together for success. Parent Sonja Mayes is one of the many parents grateful for the school’s welcoming attitude toward parents and its emphasis on diversity. She concludes, “This school is giving our kids the tools to be successful in life.”

REFERENCES

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

No Place for Hate. New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League. Web site: www.adl.org/npfh_philadelphia.

What Are Finalists?

Finalists are schools and districts selected by CEP evaluators on the basis of their strong written applications. In 2008, CEP chose 25 national Finalists for site visits by two-person teams. The Blue Ribbon Panel faced the enormous challenge of selecting this year’s 11 Winners from an outstanding pool. The exemplary nature of the character education efforts of the other 14 Finalists merits the detailed descriptions that follow.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Dr. Donna M. Dunar, Principal
Alta S. Leary Elementary School
157 Henry Avenue
Warminster, PA 18974

Telephone: (215) 441-6066
E-mail: DunaDo@CentennialSD.org
Web site: www.centennialsd.org/lee



THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER:

Dr. Donna Dunar

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Bring the theoretical to the practical. You can realize success, knowing that it is about building relationships, with a strong emphasis on respect, excellence, innovation, and high-level active engagement of students, families, and staff.*