

Bayless Junior High School

Grades 7-8 • Public/Suburban • St. Louis, Missouri • Bayless School District

Embracing and Celebrating Diversity

The Bayless School District, located southwest of the city of St. Louis, holds the distinction of being “the most culturally diverse district in the state.” Currently, the enrollment reflects a student body that is 27 percent Bosnian, 3 percent Hispanic, 7 percent Asian, 10 percent African-American, 1 percent Native American, and 52 percent Caucasian.



THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER:

Ronald J. Tucker

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

It works! Seek out professional development training in character education. Build a team of people genuinely interested in developing the character of the school and its inhabitants. The team should read the works of highly regarded authors in character education. And, finally, start small.

Bayless Junior High School has not only recognized this diversity but also purposefully embraced it and celebrated it as a strength. A typical lunch period finds students of different races and ethnicities chatting with each other in the cafeteria, as if they belonged to one family.

“Relationships build trust and a caring community,” says Bayless principal Ronald Tucker, who points out that the advisories have been an excellent venue “for staff to form personal relationships with the students, as well as for students to bond with one another.” Students remain in the same group, and with the same advisor, for seventh and eighth grades, thus enhancing relationships and breaking down walls. Both teachers and student leaders receive training in “bully proofing” the school, and parents are kept in the loop through workshops,

brochures, and letters (communication is also carried out in Bosnian and Spanish). Students, teachers, and parents engage in candid discussions on bullying, peer pressure, and teen depression. Unity, not competition, is encouraged at this school, and all interested students are accepted into sports and clubs without “trying out.” Parents are grateful for the administration’s efforts to include them, and they appreciate Tucker’s personal touch: The principal writes a personal comment on each report card.

Bayless was not always such a model of harmony. When Tucker became principal five years ago, he felt that “something seemed to be missing,” and that concerns about student discipline were too prevalent. Under his leadership, the faculty gathered data via the original Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, and realized the staff needed training to make necessary changes in school culture. A group of teachers, students, and parents learned much from their participation in the St. Louis Rams Huddle Up for Advisory sponsored by Characterplus, and Tucker gleaned ideas from his own training in the Leadership Academy in Character Education. School counselor Suzanne Richardson remarks, “We also discovered that student voices were missing.” From this came the creation of the Character Council class that trains student leaders.

Tucker reports that this four-year journey, focusing on evaluation and

professional development, has resulted in “significant accomplishments, including a 68 percent decrease in fighting, [a] 57 percent decrease in out-of-school suspensions, and a 42 percent decrease in failing grades, while achieving a 95 percent attendance rate and meeting Adequate Yearly Progress [goals] in each of the last four years.” The hard data certainly prove that the accent on character has made Bayless Junior High a safer, more caring, higher-performing school. However, a conversation overheard between two seventh graders puts a human face on school culture: Nicole says that it was “harder to make friends at her old school,” a comment to which Allyson readily agrees, noting that she hasn’t “seen a new kid go more than one day here before making friends.”

REFERENCES

CHARACTERplus. St. Louis, MO: Cooperating School Districts. Web site: www.characterplus.org.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Washington, DC: US Office of Special Education Programs. Web site: www.pbis.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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