

Brigantine Elementary School

Grades PreK-4 • Public/Suburban • Brigantine, New Jersey • Brigantine Public Schools

Making Kindness Contagious

Folks in Brigantine, New Jersey, really take to heart the motto of its elementary school: *Strong Schools Build Strong Communities*. In 1997, when Brigantine Elementary School was named by Mission: Kindness International, Inc. as the Kindest School in New Jersey, the entire community decided to get on the kindness bandwagon and follow the lead of its children. Apparently, kindness is contagious in this island community just east of Atlantic City. The city of Brigantine earned the accolade the Kindest Place in New Jersey, and the school went on to take the Kindest School honor three more times.

Each school year begins with an opening address by principal Don Marrandino in which he urges the school to be “a caring community,” one in which “everyone treats each other with kindness and respect.” Direct instruction and modeling soon reinforce the message; October, slated as the Kindness Month, sees the children logging acts of thoughtfulness. Last year the little ones managed to record an amazing 19,231 acts of kindness in just one month! Although Brigantine Elementary may be best known for Kindness Is Contagious, an original program described as a model in the *Congressional Record*, its innovative approach to character education shows great versatility. This New Jersey Star School has won the state’s Best Practices awards for two other character initiatives: a Multicultural, Cross-Curricular Approach to Arts Education (a 2007 Promising Practice), which promotes cultural understanding and acceptance through art, music, language, library, and technology; and Get Yourself Moving, a multi-dimensional program of health,

nutrition, and exercise aimed at fostering a healthful lifestyle.

Ties to the community are particularly strong at Brigantine. An active Student Council has initiated and implemented a host of service projects, such as a school-wide recycling program and a clean-up project at the foot of the Brigantine Bridge. Many organizations recognize the school’s efforts to instill and model character. Thomas Rubino, the director of public affairs for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, who worked with the school on its fitness project, says, “We were impressed with the commitment and love for the students expressed by the school’s principal, staff, and teachers. They go beyond just teaching character. They demonstrate character by their care and respect for the student.”

Winning more than a dozen prestigious national and state awards for character education seems incredible for any school, but it is indeed astounding for Brigantine Elementary, which must contend with many formidable obstacles. Forty-five percent of its students come from disadvantaged homes, and English is the second language to 18 percent of its student body. Yet student performance on the New Jersey 2006–07 Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (ASK) for Grade 4 was excellent: 90.1 percent were proficient or above in mathematics; the figures for language arts and science are 88.4 percent and 95.9 percent, respectively. Featured in the August/September 2006 edition of the national magazine *Teaching K–8*, the school is also the recipient of a \$10,000 grant from the Boyer Center for the 2006 Boyer Best Practice Award, “Nurturing a Caring Community.” Brigantine Elementary School is the first New Jersey school to win this award.

Clearly, the caring students at Brigantine *live* the message of “others



THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER: Donald A. Marrandino

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION: Guiding children to make good choices is an unbelievable force in changing school climate and raising student achievement. Start with a committee that represents the staff, the parents, and the community. Get the input from all, and look at data to see where you want to go. Make certain you model what you want your children to practice. Our philosophy is that the relationships among adults who inhabit a school has more to do with the school's quality and character, and with the accomplishments of its pupils, than any other factor.¹

first.” When the Leukemia Society offered to give a pizza party for them in appreciation of their fund raising, the students refused and voted unanimously to award the gift certificate to a family in need. Dr. Robert Previti, the superintendent of schools, praises Brigantine Elementary for leading the community: “Character has become the thinking philosophy of the island. We are the best practitioners of what we believe.”

REFERENCES

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- Statewide Kindness Awareness Campaign*. Trenton, NJ: Mission: Kindness International, Inc.

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