

## Gainesville High School

Grades 9–12 • Public/Suburban • Gainesville, Georgia • Gainesville City School System

### Caring about Relevance, Relationships, and Results

The city of Gainesville, Georgia, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and adjacent to Lake Lanier, just radiates Southern charm. Its high school, a state-of-the-art facility with open pavilions and an outdoor learning center, also exudes that warm hospitality. Students welcome visitors graciously, interact politely with one another, and chat respectfully with their teachers. Blessed with a warm climate, the school seems equally blessed with perfect students.

But the Gainesville success story is not about Southern charm and easy perfection. It is about hard work and commitment on the part of a passionate principal, an industrious staff, and dedicated parents who work together to shape a school that is academically rigorous and ethically focused. When Mike Kemp became Gainesville's principal in 2006, the faculty took a hard look at the school's approach to academics and character building. Kemp's question—"Do you believe all kids can learn?"—prompted the staff to devise ways that would promote the success of all students in a school that



has a minority population of 73 percent and a high poverty rate (65 percent on free or reduced-cost lunch). Striving to keep the vision simple, the staff decided to focus 100 percent on caring, and coined the school's motto: *Caring about Relevance Everyday, Caring about Relationships Everyday, Caring about Results Everyday* (C.A.R.E.). In deciding on core values, the staff accented respect, restraint, and responsibility as the new *Three R's*. A C.A.R.E. marketing campaign introduced all stakeholders to the new vision and the new academic expectations.

Currently, the school has moved all students into the most rigorous academic track and has created four learning academies to personalize instruction. Professional development sessions spur many lively discussions in which the staff explores the ideas of Tomlinson and McTighe and exchanges ways to differentiate learning. Moral character is not forgotten either. Words of Wisdom begin each day; caring, respect, and empathy are reinforced; and opportunities for service, both local and global, abound. Gainesville High is now reaping the rewards of its fusing of moral and performance character. The school's graduation rate has increased from 64 to 80 percent, disciplinary referrals have declined drastically, student performance on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests has improved significantly for all groups, and the school has met AYP goals in all categories. Kemp, who has moved on to

become assistant superintendent in another Georgia district, reports, "We have had more than 40 districts come to visit and learn what teachers at GHS are doing. They see what we have accomplished with our students—our Title I poverty, majority minority, high English language learners population—and they want to know the secret."

What is that "secret," according to parents and students? Interviews consistently point to the extraordinary caring demonstrated by both teachers and students. Story after story illustrates how a teacher touched the life of a student. With the help of a staff translator, a Hispanic father provides a particularly poignant tribute. First, he describes the attention that the staff showered on his special needs child that made "a 200 percent difference." He then tells about the time that his son lost his wallet. When the father came to report his son's loss, he discovered that another student had already turned in the wallet. The stats show great test results, but the soul of Gainesville High School is 100 percent caring.

#### REFERENCES

- Tomlinson, C.A., and J. McTighe. *Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding by Design: Connecting Content and Kids*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.
- Words of Wisdom*. Bellaire, TX: Project Wisdom, Inc. Web site: [www.projectwisdom.com](http://www.projectwisdom.com).

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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#### THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER:

Mike Kemp

##### ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

*It is worth it...the kids get it! Let character education be the foundation on which your school climate and expectations are built. You will not fail if your character education program has a simple vision to which your stakeholders can relate. Never underestimate the long-term influence a character education program can have on your children.*