

Lore Elementary School

Grades K-5 • Public/Suburban • Ewing, New Jersey • Ewing Township Public Schools

Weaving a Fabric Called UNITY

“Our teachers care about us; it’s rare to see an unhappy face here,” says Matt, a typical fifth grader in Lore Elementary School in Ewing, a suburb of Trenton in western New Jersey. A visitor can easily see proof of Matt’s observation. In a kindergarten classroom, the little ones take pleasure in the attention given them by their fifth-grade buddies; in another room, a group of students respond warmly to their teacher’s praise of their project for the Multicultural Museum; in yet another room, a senior citizen seems as delighted as her young audience as she reads a story to a class. Clearly, a feeling of unity of people and purpose dominates this 2008 New Jersey School of Character that received no fewer than five national awards last year for its service to the community.

Lore’s UNITY program, in existence since 1995, is a dynamic, homegrown initiative created by a farsighted staff in response to the school’s changing demographics. With the shift in the school’s ethnic and racial makeup, its leaders realized that student autonomy was critical to the success of a character program

focused on diversity. Thus students were asked to identify and develop approximately 20 core value words that would teach one another how to live together in a global community. Typical character words—respect, cooperation, acceptance, supporting, and giving—were among those on the list. Atypical, however, was the program that this initiative spawned. From these 20 words came daily lessons and special school projects that made Lore a model school that exemplified



diversity and received New Jersey’s prestigious Star School (1999) award.

Superintendent of schools Raymond Broach states, “The UNITY program is the fabric of the school community at Lore.” Since its inception, the program has been refined and restructured to include a social skills curriculum, physical education challenges, and service learning. All teachers also receive training in the Responsive Classroom model to provide them with effective strategies. Four innovative features make the UNITY program distinctive. The first is building cohesiveness through UNITY groups or “families” that consist of students from each grade level. A second feature is the Linking Ceremony that takes place about once a month and acknowledges students for demonstrating the moral meaning of the UNITY words through example. A third feature is the Constitutional Convention held every two or three

years. At this meeting, student delegates participate in the creation of school-wide rules that eventually must be ratified by the entire student body. Last is the Parent University, which consists of structured evening sessions that provide parents with information on community services, local sites for enrichment, and tips on ways to assist their children with learning.

Working with the Center for Social and Character Development (CSCD) at Rutgers University, Lore serves as a model for diversity and sustained character education. Student performance on state-wide tests is outstanding, and Lore has met Adequate Yearly Progress goals in all categories. Indefatigable principal Patricia Womelsdorf says that Lore’s growing commitment to service has further enriched the UNITY program. Her favorite initiative is the spring project that entails preparing and delivering as many as 150 baskets for people in greater Mercer County, because “every member of the student and adult community touches the project directly.” Mary Lou Kramli, a school board member, sums up Lore’s caring spirit: “There’s something special about this school that envelops everyone who walks in.”

REFERENCES

Center for Social and Character Development. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University. Web site: www.rucharacter.org.
Responsive Classroom. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children. Web site: www.responsiveclassroom.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:
Look at your school, its population, and ask, “What do our children need to make them better equipped as young adults to become positive contributing members of society?” Build your adult community too. Your program’s values must be modeled by the adults supporting the initiative. Lastly, make sure your program involves collaborative planning and remains dynamic.