

## Chesterfield Elementary School

Grades K-5 • Chesterfield, Missouri • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 545 • Rockwood School District

### Inspiring a Love of Learning

“You know you’ve inspired students to dream about possibilities in learning when they are discussing their Oregon Trail journey throughout the day, on the playground, the bus, after school, and at home around the dinner table.” Chesterfield Elementary School teacher Lori Mathys reports an amazing phenomenon: Students just love learning!

Those of us who grew up during the days of teacher-directed learning seldom look back lovingly on our history lessons. To some of us, studying history meant juggling a musty textbook filled with small print, memorizing dull dates and facts, and dutifully filling in the blanks with names from the distant past. Gone are those days at Chesterfield Elementary School in Chesterfield, Missouri, one of 19 elementary schools in the Rockwood School District (a 2006 NSOC)—a district that is highly respected for its accomplishments in character education.

Chesterfield has not abandoned the pursuit of knowledge or exchanged it for a watered-down substitute that has little more to offer than sheer sensory delights. On the contrary, students are approaching their studies with renewed vigor and understanding, and they consistently perform well on standardized tests. The difference is that they are now taking charge of their learning. An integral part of Chesterfield’s approach to character education is the challenge of granting students a voice in *what* they learn and *how* they learn. The force behind this movement is Jill Ramsey, the school’s dynamic principal, who fervently believes that student autonomy leads to improved academics and enhanced character development. Ramsey says, “Learning is more meaningful to our students when they participate in making decisions about what they learn and how they want to demonstrate that learning.”

Typical of Chesterfield’s dynamic approach to instruction is its fourth-grade online unit, *Westward Ho*. Students work together in small groups to create historical family identities, pack their Conestoga wagons, and head out on the Oregon Trail. Students must face daily decisions and subsequent fates as they learn to rely on their research skills and inventive thinking to help them travel safely from Missouri to Oregon. Fourth-grade teachers say, “What helps to make this project so special and meaningful for the students is that they have control over what happens to their families along the trail . . . Students are empowered and take their learning to a higher level with the real-world connections they make in the classroom.”

### Laying the Foundation for Everything

Ramsey is quick to point out, “Character education at Chesterfield is not a ‘program’; it is the foundation for everything we do. Character education, strong academics, and service learning are not separated in our school.” The school’s journey to infuse character education began in 1998, when the Rockwood School District, with strong community input, decided on nine character traits to be developed in each of its schools. This district commitment provided a philosophical framework, with professional support to follow.



Participants in Chesterfield’s Hope Run, who helped raise over \$15,000 for cancer research, spell out the word HOPE.

The flourishing of character education at Chesterfield owes a debt to Dr. Marvin Berkowitz, the Sanford N. McDonnell Professor of Character Education at the University of Missouri—St. Louis. In 2002, Berkowitz introduced class meetings and buddy activities to the Chesterfield staff, with strong support by Ramsey. These early training sessions were the impetus to use class meetings to empower students to make decisions about classroom and school climate. Class meetings were implemented in all classrooms, leading to the use of student voice in decisions ranging from curricular content to assessment. The principal, together with assistant principal Sharon O’Day, participated in the Sanford N. McDonnell Leadership Academy in Character Education, under the direction of Berkowitz, establishing a solid foundation for a character education program. Then, in addition to offering external professional training to the staff, Chesterfield implemented the model of “teachers teaching teachers” to achieve full faculty support. With the introduction in 2005 of the Characterplus—Caring School Community Implementation Project professional training sessions and annual surveys, new initiatives were added, such as homeside activities and service learning. Second-grade teacher Meredith Sallee says, “Character is embedded in everything we do at Chesterfield.”

The Caring School Community Team, comprised of staff members and parents, coupled with the Character Counts Kids Team, provides strong leadership today. Analysis of data is pivotal in setting annual goals and evaluating the school’s progress. Although the principal is highly visible in the school, she intentionally builds leadership skills in others by giving them opportunities to lead. O’Day says, “Jill calls me her co-principal! We’re all in this together—we may have different roles, but we all have the same goals.” Ramsey agrees, adding, “We want Chesterfield’s character initiatives to be sustained over time. The only way we can do that is by sharing decision-making and expanding the leadership throughout the school. We’re confident that what we’ve accomplished will last.”

### Demonstrating Caring in Many Ways

Chesterfield takes its identity as a caring school community seriously. Conversations with teachers, students, and parents reveal a consistent message: “This is a place where everyone cares about me.” *We Are Gold and Blue . . . and Caring, Too*, the school motto that has been developed by the Character Counts



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Chesterfield Elementary School:

- High academic achievement, as evidenced by the school’s presence, each year from 1999 to the present, on the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) Top Ten list (of highest-performing schools in the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced) in both communication arts and math
- 2007 Missouri School of Character (one of the first four schools selected for this award)
- Improved parent, student, and staff perceptions of character education, especially in valuing student input/voice, as indicated on CHARACTERplus—Caring School Community Surveys and District Character Education/School Climate Surveys
- Improved student behavior, with a 58 percent decrease in disciplinary referrals over the last 4 years and a 28 percent decrease in repeat offenders
- Named one of only 13 National Association for Sport and Physical Education STARS Schools in 2008
- Assistance of over 250 parent and more than 80 community volunteers in student learning; increased involvement of parents on the Caring School Community Team; and assistance of over 20 businesses in the Hope Run to raise money for cancer research
- Recipient of Promising Practices awards from the Character Education Partnership in 2004, 2005, and 2008
- 15 John M. Kastner Rockwood School District Board of Education Awards for high academic achievement
- Above 96 percent average daily attendance in each of the last 5 years

Kids Team, is more than a catchy slogan displayed prominently throughout the school. Staff, students, and parents treat one another with kindness and respect. Fifth grader Kylie says, “Chesterfield sort of feels like a family. We take care of each other and help each other.” Less analytical but equally enthusiastic is the response of second grader Rachelle: “I love this school so much.”

Parent Cathy Coffman points out how both the teachers and the support staff serve as role models: “Character education at Chesterfield is teaching and showing, not telling!” Teachers treat each child as special, attend extra-curricular events, and model the



Kindergarten and third-grade buddies at Chesterfield

traits they want the children to develop. Parents readily list many ways that teachers have shown personal interest in their students. Patricia Humphries, a parent of a transfer student from St. Louis, states, “My son’s grades have come up. Teachers really care about the kids.” Parent Eleni Murphy says, “Teachers here come to everything! There was even a kindergarten teacher who had all the kids in her wedding.”

Class meetings serve as an excellent vehicle for students to express ideas and bond with one another. Fourth grader Matt particularly likes the idea of beginning the meeting with compliments: “Everyone gets a chance to feel good when other people say nice things about you.” Buddy classes also help to develop empathy and understanding as the older students work with the younger ones on interesting projects. Just as the “teachers teach teachers,” the students guide one another in systematically developing the core character traits. The Character Counts Kids Team creates videos for their classmates in which the team members model appropriate behavior.

Service projects develop feelings of compassion for others. To honor two staff members who were battling cancer, the students and staff created a Hope Garden, and they also participated in a Hope Run that, with the support of the community and 20 businesses, raised over \$15,000 for cancer research. Other projects run the gamut from singing to residents at

Delmar Gardens, a local nursing home, to collecting and packing special treats for the troops in Iraq.

### Listening to the Student Voice to Spur Learning

Students clearly have a “voice” at Chesterfield. From deciding class norms and providing curriculum input to carrying out service-learning projects, students are made to feel an important part, not only of the character initiative but also of their own learning. Ramsey says, “If we were to sum up in one sentence what we are most proud of with our character education initiatives, we would have to say it is seeing the smiles and excitement on the faces of our children each day as they productively engage in meaningful learning activities.”

Chesterfield, in its mission statement, aims to “[help] each child achieve his/her personal best and instill a love of learning while preparing him/her to be a responsible citizen.” Teachers employ a host of instructional strategies—project-based learning, cooperative groups, individualized activities, infusion of technology, ethical decision-making—to help realize those goals. Through inquiry-based learning, students advance from what they know to what they would like to know, and ultimately to what they have learned. Grade-level teacher teams meet regularly to explore what has worked, and students add their input at class meetings. Teachers agree that students feel valued for the input they make into curricular decisions, which leads to higher motivation and achievement, and that the climate at Chesterfield fosters a love of learning for all students.

Students also play a role in the administration of discipline. At class meetings, students generate norms for acceptable behavior. Behavioral infractions become occasions for reflection, not punishment. Students must reflect on their actions and record on a Think Sheet what caused them to be sent to the office. The goal, of course, is for students to comprehend how practicing one of the core character traits would lead to acceptable behavior. Clearly, the emphasis on positive change, not punishment, works: disciplinary referrals decreased by 58 percent over the last four years.

## Chesterfield Elementary School Character Traits

courage	cooperation	respect	self-control	patience
perseverance	responsibility		caring	integrity

## Including Parents Every Step of the Way

Parent involvement is very high at Chesterfield. There are 50 PTO committees and approximately 200 volunteers who work at the school weekly. In deciding whether to introduce a new activity, the underlying questions are always *Does this benefit our students?* and *How does it support our mission?*

Chesterfield has consistently taken a proactive approach to informing parents and makes certain to keep them in the loop about changes. For example, when a new program, Everyday Math, was being introduced, Chesterfield provided background information on the program, held a series of parent informational meetings, set up question-and-answer forums, and implemented the program in stages. Parent Vickie Bounds tells how Chesterfield's approach contrasted with that of another community that provided no such advance preparation. The result: Chesterfield parents felt comfortable with the change and accepted it, while those in the other community thought it controversial and protested. Bounds relates this anecdote to illustrate the difference between Chesterfield and other schools. Chesterfield shows a "genuine concern for the feelings of parents and students."

The administration is constantly "thinking out of the box" in its efforts to include all parents. For example, when the parents of students from inner city St. Louis who attend Chesterfield through a voluntary inter-district choice program found it difficult to attend conferences, the principal offered the parents free transportation. Moreover, Riding to Read, an innovative program developed by O'Day, provides tapes and books to those youngsters on their 50-minute bus ride to Chesterfield. As a result, the students have demonstrated a dramatic increase in reading power.

## Planning New Projects and Sharing Success

As it makes its debut as a National School of Character, Chesterfield will continue to explore new initiatives to enrich its efforts, chief among them being an expansion of the school's service-learning component. The Caring School Community Team is looking for "opportunities to provide a service to the community that has a curricular connection at each grade level." Some grade levels have already started this work, and others are planning for next year. Ideas include matching science curriculum goals with service to Forest Park, a large park in the city of St. Louis. Another proposal is to identify curricular connections



### PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Jill Ramsey

**TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *caring* and *high-achieving*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD:** student voice and choice in curricular decisions, and development of school climate through class meetings

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL**

**CLIMATE:** feeling tone of the building, data indicating increased feelings of belonging and student ownership, dramatic decrease in disciplinary referrals, collegiality of staff

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC**

**ACHIEVEMENT:** student performance on state tests, resulting in Chesterfield Elementary regularly being placed on the Top Ten list in Missouri; making academic gains annually for all student groups

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:**

*Character education initiatives should be the foundation of everything in your school. Involve students, teachers, staff members, parents, and the community in building this foundation.*

to the school's annual food project. The team intends to include students in these curricular decisions in order to inculcate a lifelong habit of giving to others.

The energetic faculty has been active in spreading their work beyond the walls of Chesterfield. The principal and several staff members have presented at conferences and to other districts, and others have created a training DVD for Characterplus that models successful class meetings. In Chesterfield's expanded outreach role, it is certain that the Character Counts Kids Team will have a voice. After all, it's all about inspiring kids in this child-centered learning community.

### REFERENCES

*Caring School Community.* Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center. Web site: [www.devstu.org/csc](http://www.devstu.org/csc).

CHARACTERplus. St. Louis, MO: Cooperating School Districts. Web site: [www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org).

Sanford N. McDonnell Leadership Academy in Character Education. CHARACTERplus. St. Louis, MO: Cooperating School Districts. Web site: [www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org).

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