

Lindbergh School District

Grades PreK–12 • St. Louis County, Missouri • Public/Suburban
Enrollment 5,599

Having a Heart for Kids

Missouri may be known as the “Show-Me” state, but Lindbergh School District in St. Louis County could well be called the “Show-Them” district for its effective demonstration of character. For 19 years the district has been steadfast in its commitment to character building and has reaped multiple rewards for having “a heart for kids.”

The Lindbergh School District has always been in the vanguard of character building. When it took its first steps in 1989 to introduce character education in all of its buildings, the world was a different place. No cell phones, no laptops, no iPods, no text messages, no Character Education Partnership (CEP). However, the founding committee had the vision to see that a district-wide espousal of character, with all schools and the community on board, would be the best way to achieve the district’s goal: *to develop competent and caring graduates through exceptional programs, services, and personnel.*

The Lindbergh campaign for character was just two years old when Jim Sandfort took the reins as the district’s superintendent of schools. It was the district’s commitment to character that prompted Sandfort to join Lindbergh, and it was the board’s support of it that sustained him for 17 years. The now-retired superintendent says, “Even though individual board members have come and gone, the board has always cared deeply about students, staff, and families. They have had only one agenda: what is best for children.”

The faculty also is committed to “what is best for children.” Sandfort describes the Lindbergh staff as “good people who care deeply about kids and are willing to go above and beyond every day.” Certainly, a prime example of extraordinary dedication is Amy Richards, the district coordinator for character education. A 25-year veteran of the Lindbergh district, Richards served on the original Character Education



Students at Lindbergh Early Childhood Education share and celebrate their Chinese heritage with their classmates.

Committee and can testify to its growth: “Character now is pervasive in all we do—it’s an integral part of our vision and our mission, our curricular as well as extra-curricular activities, our board policies and annual goal-setting, and our staff’s concept of how best to educate children.”

Missouri must be proud of its accomplishments in character building this year, because four of the 2008 National Schools of Character (in addition to Lindbergh as a National District of Character) hail from the state. But the Lindbergh School District, the only district to be named a 2008 District of Character, holds another special distinction: one of its schools, Sappington Elementary, also has garnered the NSOC award this year. Sandy McDonnell, the chairman emeritus of CEP and chairman of Characterplus, says, “This is only the second time that a district and a school within that district have been honored in the same year.”

Planning and Structuring a District-Wide Plan

Lindbergh’s achievements attest to the effectiveness of its intentional and structured approach to character development. CEP honored Kennerly Elementary School as an NSOC in 2000, and seven of the district’s eight schools, as well as the district itself, have won one or more Promising Practices awards. Despite the accolades, Richards says, “We never reach the top, because there is no top.” Each year the Character

Education Committee, which includes representatives from all schools and the community, starts anew. Sandfort explains, “Each year we challenge ourselves with stretch goals, based on what we have learned from the current year and what feedback we have received from formal and informal assessments.”

“Everybody’s on board and has a voice in what’s going on,” says Sperreng Middle School parent Kathy Bade. Knowing the importance of involving all stakeholders from the start, the original character committee sought local business leaders, clergy, law enforcement officials, coaches, and parents, as well as staff, to choose and discuss character words and traits. After much deliberation, the committee decided on the core values of integrity, courage, patience, service, self-control, goal setting, honesty, cooperation, respect, responsibility, peace, and caring. The multiple training resources of Characterplus have played an important role at each of the three typical stages of character initiatives: inception, development, and evaluation. Dr. Marvin Berkowitz, the Sanford N. McDonnell Professor of Character Education and co-director of the Center for Character and Citizenship at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, has been a motivational force and an effective facilitator in Lindbergh’s growth.

As a result of the feedback received after applying to the NSOC awards program in 2003, Lindbergh has evolved to another stage. Richards points out, “The feedback from this process served as a self-assessment tool for improving the alignment of all character education initiatives.” Not only did the incorporation of Caring School Community initiatives enhance the program, but, according to Richards, “Character education became a parallel district priority with student achievement.” The data show that the decision was a wise one, because student achievement has soared with the renewed emphasis on character.

Providing District Support

Through its philosophical framework, financial support, release time, and staff training, the Lindbergh district makes character education a district priority. The recipient of the Commissioner’s Award of Excellence for Staff Development in 2003, the district promotes Professional Learning Communities in each of the schools, so that teachers, functioning in a collegial relationship, can share ideas on academic, character, and leadership objectives. Character education professional development sessions cover a wide range of topics, such as facilitating class meetings, integrating



The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working in the Lindbergh School District:

- Performance in the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) improved in communication arts, as shown by increased percentages of students scoring advanced or proficient:
 - ✓ In 3rd grade, the percentage increased 54 percent (from 40.4 percent of students in 2004 to 62.4 percent in 2006).
 - ✓ In 7th grade, the percentage increased 27 percent (from 49 percent of students in 2004 to 62.1 percent in 2006).
 - ✓ In 11th grade, the percentage increased 24 percent (from 48 percent of students in 2004 to 59.5 percent in 2006).
- Performance in MAP also improved in mathematics, as shown by increased percentages of students scoring advanced or proficient:
 - ✓ In 4th grade, the percentage increased 19 percent (from 62.6 percent of students in 2004 to 74.6 percent in 2006).
 - ✓ In 8th grade, the percentage increased 138 percent (from 24.6 percent of students in 2004 to 58.6 percent in 2006).
 - ✓ In 10th grade, the percentage increased 89 percent (from 32.7 percent of students in 2004 to 61.7 percent in 2006).
- Student attendance increased from 94.6 percent in 2002 to 96.7 percent in 2006.
- The graduation rate rose from 84.5 percent in 2002 to 93.9 percent in 2007.
- Total disciplinary referrals in the district decreased from 8,388 in 2002–03 to 5,429 in 2006–07.
- Student, staff, and parent responses on *Caring School Community* surveys and *CHARACTERplus* surveys indicate a high degree of satisfaction with school climate.
- The State of Missouri has recognized the district for Distinction in Performance in seven consecutive years: 2001 through 2007.
- CEP honored Kennerly (2000) and Sappington (2008) as National Schools of Character.
- Seven of the district’s schools, as well as the district itself, have been recipients of CEP’s Promising Practices awards.
- Community participation in service has increased: Donations to support community charities increased from \$69,160 in 2004–05 to \$91,050 in 2005–06, and service efforts increased from 80 in 2003 to 135 in 2007.

character themes within academic lesson plans, using class meetings to promote a caring classroom environment, addressing curricular needs, teaching conflict resolution skills to solve peer conflicts, diminishing bullying, encouraging student autonomy, implementing service learning as an instructional strategy, and understanding the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Bonnie Wolk, who joined the district last year as a third-grade teacher at Long Elementary School, admits that she was “somewhat reluctant” to attend a new-teacher orientation at first. She felt it would be a waste of time because she had prior teaching experience in two other districts. However, the “quality of the training” soon changed her mind, and she was grateful in September to have “practical strategies for character development.”

Many students point out that the consistent character message articulated and reinforced throughout their school days has had a profound effect on them. Nick, a junior at Lindbergh High says, “Having grown up in Lindbergh schools, I feel character education has been a natural part of my education.” Graduating senior Dan adds, “The character virtues are in the bloodstream of our district. We just follow them naturally because we have talked about them and learned about them since kindergarten.” Another graduating senior, Samantha, points out their

importance even after graduation: “Character education has been a helpful tool in teaching me the proper way to carry myself throughout my life.”

The Heart to Serve, Hands to Help initiative (a 2008 Promising Practice) serves as a powerful example of the way a school district and a community can unite for a cause. With the twin objectives of turning community service into service learning and increasing the number of participants, Sandfort challenged the entire community on September 11, 2007, “to initiate ongoing personal service projects before November 11, 2007.” Partnerships flourished, and 35,000 hours of service were recorded in just two months as local business, religious, civic, and charitable organizations joined hands with students, staff, and parents in unified efforts to help the community.

Kindergartner Marcos of Long Elementary School is one who quickly caught the spirit. Determined to save trees, he came up with a recycling plan, which he drew on flyers of his own making, and, after spurring his family to get involved, he distributed these flyers around town. Walking door to door early on Saturday mornings with his red wagon to collect paper and aluminum cans, little Marcos became a familiar figure who inspired his family, his neighborhood, and the entire district to be responsible in caring for the environment.

SUPERINTENDENT'S BEST PICKS:

Dr. James Sandfort (retired)

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR DISTRICT: *heart for kids*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: our Heart to Serve, Hands to Help initiative, a district-wide commitment that enabled us to increase the population of students, families, and staff who embraced serving others

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: CHARACTER*plus* surveys from 2002 to the present testify to the change in school climate.

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: improved student performance in the Missouri Assessment Program

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *You're on a journey. Never, never give up. In the commitment to graduating competent and caring students, character education is an incredible force.*

Working Hard in Individual Schools

The district provides the training for the implementation of common strategies such as class meetings, buddy classes, and conflict resolution, but each school has its own Character Education Committee and is granted autonomy in addressing its own needs. For example, the high school focuses on the six pillars of Character Counts. However, the underlying philosophy and language are consistent throughout the district.

A quick look at just a few of the Promising Practices awards made to the Lindbergh schools shows the breadth and vigor of their efforts. The practices vary from an environmental endeavor in which students at all grade levels grow butterfly gardens to an Early Childhood Center practice in which each family creates a poster describing its members so the preschooler can share information about his or her family with others. Many of this year's Promising Practices reflect the district's emphasis on service learning. For example, Truman Elementary students partner with the local historical society in a plan to improve a local cemetery, Kennerly Elementary works with the Department of Conservation in hands-on learning at

outdoor sites, and Lindbergh Academy students perform community service as a graduation requirement. What is interesting is that many projects were student inspired. Linda Garcia, a first-grade teacher at Long Elementary, is amazed that Lindbergh students, unlike those in her previous districts, are “very involved in everything that goes on.” She adds, “Their ideas are very creative, often far better than anything that the staff had suggested.”

Reaching Out to the Community

Parent Peggy Robb says, “Our kids at Lindbergh are more focused on service than when I was in school. I believe that this is great, since our kids are developing habits of giving to others, and these habits transfer into lifelong patterns of giving.” Parents take an active role in school life in all the traditional ways, but they have been intensely involved in service projects.

If any story epitomizes the outpouring of love and help that characterizes the Lindbergh School District, it is the unified community support for Angels’ Arms, a non-profit organization for foster children. Bess Wilfong, a former Lindbergh staff member and a foster mother herself, realized the traumatic experiences endured by siblings who had to be separated in foster care. In 2000, after she established Angels’ Arms, she worked with a group to purchase a home in the Lindbergh School District that could house 12 foster children and allow siblings to stay together. Her inspiration and vision has inspired community service and service learning to flourish throughout the district.

Students, staff, parents, and community members have joined together as a caring family and ministered to the physical, intellectual, and emotional needs of the children who reside in that home. Students, staff, and parents from the middle school and high school tutor in academic subjects, give music/voice lessons, donate birthday gifts and toys, and serve in a variety of other ways, such as babysitting, cooking meals, and making holiday stockings. Not to be outdone by the older students, the younger ones have held lemonade stand fund raisers and have collected donations for household items, toiletries, school supplies, and winter wear. An enterprising third-grade class, learning about budgets, stretched their research to determine the impact of expanding from the average two-child family to a 12-child family. The students’ research concluded with a Market Day in which the children donated items for a sale at school in order to purchase birthday and summer treats for the foster children.

Richards says, “Bess Wilfong is truly a hero in character education, and her heroism has spread throughout the district, with heroic activity after heroic activity by new heroes that were inspired by her example.”

Ensuring That Graduates Are Good For Something

The Lindbergh story makes good news because it demonstrates vividly how a long-term commitment to character education clearly works. As Lindbergh’s superintendent, Sandfort also served as president of the Superintendents’ Council, which included 45 other local superintendents. Together, they helped to move the character education initiatives in their districts forward. His successor at Lindbergh, Dr. Jim Simpson, is equally committed to “instilling a moral compass” in Lindbergh’s students and sharing the Lindbergh story with other districts. The Lindbergh Character Education Committee, already accustomed to presenting at the CEP Forum, the annual St. Louis Character Conference, and Characterplus sessions, will continue to proclaim the character message.

When asked to identify what has made Lindbergh such a success story, Sandfort says, “Board integrity and support, love for children and concern for staff, and a commitment to doing what is right have permeated this district and have provided the backdrop for all of our work.” With his usual hearty manner, the retired superintendent adds, “We just want to be sure that, when our students graduate, they are not only good *at* something but good *for* something.”

REFERENCES

Caring School Community. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center. Web site: www.devstu.org/csc.

CHARACTER COUNTS! Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: www.charactercounts.org

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

Sanford N. McDonnell Leadership Academy in Character Education. *CHARACTERplus*. St. Louis, MO: Cooperating School Districts. Web site: www.characterplus.org.



Members of Lindbergh High School’s RAD (Reaching Adolescent Drivers) Club promote seatbelt use by creating “Buckle Up” signs at all school building exits as well as at local shopping centers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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