

## Rosa International Middle School

Grades 6–8 • Cherry Hill, New Jersey • Public/Suburban  
Enrollment 778 • Cherry Hill Public Schools

### Creating a Better World

Every educator dreams of creating the “ideal school.” Administrators in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, had precisely that opportunity when they were given one year to remodel an older building and to plan the mission, vision, and curricular framework of their new magnet middle school. A decade later, Rosa International Middle School is a testament to the vision, the energy, and the commitment of that dedicated team.

Ed Canzanes, the principal of Rosa International Middle School in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, has an irreverent sense of humor. He also has a deep reverence for teachers and their power to create a better world.

Both facets are evident in an anecdote the witty principal tells about his rise to the principalship. When the plans for Rosa were still on the drawing board, Canzanes, then an assistant to the district superintendent, was selected to serve on the interviewing panel

for the new principal. The district hired dynamic Tammy Murphy to head the new school, and the position of assistant principal opened up. Faced with the possibility of actually creating an ideal school, Canzanes enthusiastically jumped in and applied for the position. His rationale: “A bad day with the kids is better than any day in the central office.” When Murphy left to become a superintendent in California, Canzanes became, in his own words, “the second-best principal that Rosa ever had.”

Now, 10 years later, Rosa International School, one of three middle schools in Cherry Hill and the only one to select students randomly by lottery, has emerged as a stellar middle school. Of the district’s three middle schools, it has the lowest number of disciplinary referrals, the greatest measurable involvement in service to the community, and the highest scores on the New Jersey standardized assessments, at all levels and in all areas. Canzanes attributes the success to a shared vision of educating “the whole child,” an exceptionally dedicated faculty “who bought that vision,” and the strength of an intellectually challenging International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme.

### Securing a Strong Footing

Knowing that faculty commitment was crucial to success, Murphy and Canzanes carefully recruited the first staff members and, using the International Baccalaureate model and middle level best practices, aimed to shape a school with a supportive, child-centered focus. A staff visioning exercise in the spring before the school opened helped the faculty to imagine what the new school would look and feel like.

Since the International Baccalaureate views the period of the middle years as “a particularly critical phase of personal and intellectual development,” the school focused on helping students “to participate actively and responsibly in a changing and increasingly interrelated world.” In framing its approach to character building, the Rosa staff saw service to the local and global community as an intrinsic element.

Fortunately, as Rosa was developing this approach, Cherry Hill Public Schools began a grassroots character education initiative. A group of concerned parents, teachers, and administrators met to

Rosa’s sense of community is strengthened by events such as Family Night Dinner.



formulate a mission, develop standards, and work toward having a character education committee in each school. The district also offered training for teachers, parents, support personnel, and coaches. As a result of these efforts, Rosa's Character Education Committee came into existence, with teachers and parents joining hands from the outset. Former committee chair Jennifer Parks reports that, in addition to emphasizing the district values of respect, responsibility, and American citizenship, Rosa has adopted the Community of Caring model, thereby adding the values of family, caring, and trust. Community of Caring seemed "a good fit" with Rosa's vision and "would help the school gather useful data for reflection and change." "We're always looking for change," notes assistant principal Ted Frynkewicz, who says that a school must proactively address concerns before they become problems.

Parks points out that "the district is highly supportive." Not only does it employ a part-time character education coordinator, Mona Noyes, but it also allows for two in-service days per year to be devoted to character education. Noyes describes the district's approach as "really a bottom-up effort," since each school is free to develop its own initiatives, based on the needs of its student body. Noyes praises Rosa for "turning community service into service learning."

### Building Character through Building Family

Rosa has striven to become a spirited and caring family to all students, beginning with their first introduction in sixth grade. Eighth grader Gabrielle evokes this feeling in an article that she wrote for the school publication, the *Raptor's Roar*, in which she asks, "What kind of America do we want?" She gives a colorful description of what kids can do: "Imagine a gym full of kids, doing the wave. At first, there [are] just a few people doing it, but, as the wave gets noticed, more people do it. Kindness spreads just like that. So get out there and do something nice for someone today."

The Advisory program serves as the cornerstone for building that "kind of America," first at Rosa and then in the world. Staff members are responsible for the academic, social, and emotional well-being of 12 to 15 students who come together each morning. Each advisory group, in turn, has a "buddy advisory" group at the same grade level, and typically the two teachers and two dozen or so students meet as a class. Advisory serves many purposes: students may work on character lessons, talk through issues and

problems, design and complete service projects, or plan and present their information literacy projects (ILPs). Cyndi Buchanan, the parent of an eighth grader, and also of a former student now in tenth grade, praises the way teachers get to know students here and adds, "Rosa has made a difference in every area of my children's lives."

Samantha, an eighth grader, calls Advisory "a supportive way to start each day" and says the ILP was a "great way to learn." These year-long projects offer students opportunities to pursue individual interests and to share the results of their research with their peers. Final showcase projects increase in difficulty and



## The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Rosa International Middle School:

- Rosa has the fewest suspensions of all secondary schools in the district: fewer than 20 suspensions per year, compared to a district average of at least 90.
- On New Jersey state assessments, Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) for grades 6 and 7 and Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) for grade 8, Rosa ranks in the top 8 percent of the entire state of New Jersey, though the other schools with similar demographics performed in the middle percentiles.
- Rosa students outperformed the other middle schools in the district, at all three grade levels and in all areas (language arts, mathematics, science).
- Students show increased self-motivation in response to the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme's five "areas of interaction."
- A Community of Caring report reveals a high degree of involvement of our school in character education.
- Rosa has had no expulsions from 2003 to the present.
- Since 2006, the percentages of African-American and Hispanic students enrolled in our school have increased, and the school's performance on standardized tests has improved.
- Student, teacher, support staff, and parent surveys completed in the Caring Schools Inclusion Project (CSIP), implemented by the NJ Department of Education in collaboration with the Center for Social and Character Development at Rutgers University, reveal a high degree of success with inclusion strategies at Rosa.
- Rosa met Adequate Yearly Progress goals in all areas.

depth, starting with a “tri-fold” display in sixth grade, advancing to “creating something” in seventh grade, and pursuing a controversial issue in eighth grade. Excitement runs high when it comes time for the final presentation, and students feel safe and confident in sharing what they have learned. Approaches to Learning teacher Gail Trocola reports that even students in the school’s only self-contained class (for behaviorally/emotionally disabled students) “feel comfortable presenting their ILP projects” in Advisory.

Members of Rosa's History Day Team with Senator Jim Saxon



### Caring for Every Learner

Principal Canzanese points out that “the International Baccalaureate teaches natural connections and adds depth to what students learn.” In order to preserve the family feeling in a school of close to 800 and to observe best middle school practices, the school is organized into nine Learning Communities (LCs), with a team of five faculty members assigned to each. With representation from language arts, foreign language, humanities, science, and special education, each team meets for one hour daily to plan curriculum, share effective strategies, discuss professional research, and address the specific needs of the students. This common planning time, with an emphasis on reaching out to all students, has been very productive. Parent Darcy Becker reports that her son “could barely finish a book report” when he came to Rosa and “now is being

recommended for all honors classes in high school.”

In this full-inclusion school, students with a variety of special needs are part of each Learning Community, and modifications in curriculum and assignments may be made to accommodate them. Inclusion appears to take place seamlessly, with the regular teachers and the special needs teacher working well together. In addition, students with Asperger’s syndrome and other social-cognitive deficits attend Rosa as part of the school’s Communication and Pragmatic Social Skills (CAPSS) program. Those students participate in a class that emphasizes social skills while their peers are in foreign language. Eighth grader Brendon observes, “We’re all one family, and this school helps all kids get through hard times.”

Just as the school culture stresses the importance of tolerance and acceptance at home, the International Baccalaureate curriculum emphasizes application of those traits in a wider milieu. For example, in a humanities unit entitled Culture and Conflict, students learn about America’s involvement in the geopolitical history of other countries and conclude that peaceful problem-solving leads to a better world. Frequently, teachers invite international speakers to help forge a strong connection to the real world. For example, a Ugandan priest spoke to the students in teacher Kristin Kitz’s humanities classes about the troubles facing children each day. Also, music teacher Jack Murtha introduced the idea of donating shoes to a school in Africa. A letter from the headmaster of that school attributed the subsequent improvement in student attendance to Rosa’s donation. Samantha’s observation as she looks back on the experience: “It was awesome hearing the headmaster could get the kids to school, and they were able to come to school because they had our shoes.”

### Empowering Students in Novel Ways

“A lot of the planning comes from the kids,” notes PTA president Sherrie Cohen. Through Advisory, all students have a say in the school, and students also feel free to go to Canzanese with suggestions. Parent and educational assistant Stephanie Brooks observes, “He’s not just a principal; he’s somebody the students trust to advise them.” Another source of leadership comes from the

## Rosa International Middle School Core Values

respect

responsibility

American citizenship

family

caring

trust

Character Ambassadors, students nominated by teachers and trained by members of the Character Education Committee to serve as role models and discussion leaders. They also work to support the school's efforts to address issues that arise, such as cyber-bullying, teasing, or "mean girls." Peer Leaders also help to resolve conflicts amicably.

"Everybody here empowers the students to believe in themselves," says Brooks. She shares that her daughter, initially shy, has gained the confidence from her years at Rosa to ask to be the graduation speaker. Parent Buchanan adds, "These teachers are a group of cheerleaders." She notes that teachers have called her just to say how much they appreciate her daughter. Perhaps the best tribute to the school comes from parent Leslie Rush, who says she "sent two happy children to school, and two even happier ones returned."

Intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic rewards, motivates students. Those who are observed by teachers, peers, or Character Ambassadors while performing good acts are given Raptor's Claw awards. Every student in one learning community, LC4, receives a "Cracker Jack" award sometime during the year that recognizes "the gift" that he or she has to give. Parent Greg McIntyre says that Rosa teachers manage to find the strengths in every student: "They break down walls."

### Next Steps in Creating a Better World

As a participant in the Caring Schools Inclusion Project (CSIP) that is being coordinated by the Center for Social and Character Development (CSCD) at Rutgers University, Rosa will be looking at CSIP data and results of Community of Caring surveys to plan its next steps. "We will use this formal research to guide our practice," states Canzanese.

Parks says that Rosa International will continue to expand its efforts in service learning, with an accent on the *learning* part so that the activities will have a strong curricular connection. She says, "Service learning is the great equalizer in education because students of all levels can feel successful in it. Whether it is doing research, planning a project, making phone calls, raising money, or visiting the needy, students develop attitudes and skills that will be with them for life."

Rosa students undoubtedly will be part of the school's outreach efforts and will share with other schools the many ways in which they have helped the needy, both near and far. One advisory group, inspired by the 20/20 special on poverty in Camden, decided to

## PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Ed Canzanese

**WORD TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL:** *soul-enriching*

**CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE**

**MOST PROUD:** Raptor's Claw awards program in which teachers recognize students for their good deeds as related to the principles of character education

**BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL**

**CLIMATE:** the lowest suspension rate in the district and the fewest disciplinary referrals

**EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC**

**ACHIEVEMENT:** Rosa ranks at the top of its demographic factor group in the state for academic achievement.

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

*Character education can't be something you do. It must be who you are, and your actions must reflect this each and every day.*

take gifts to the children there so they would have something to give to their parents for the holidays. When another group learned about the plight of families in El Salvador, it designed and sold handcrafted items to provide running water for a Salvadoran family. Many students volunteer at a local elementary school, while others have made dolls for children undergoing surgery at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Parks sums up the philosophical connection of service to Rosa's mission: "We teach kids to care, and we put that caring into action." Becker adds, "Rosa is a special place for kids, and it in turn produces special kids."

### REFERENCES

Center for Social and Character Development. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University. Web site: [www.rucharacter.org](http://www.rucharacter.org).

*Community of Caring*. Salt Lake City, UT: National Center for Community of Caring. Web site: [www.communityofcaring.org](http://www.communityofcaring.org).

*International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme*. New York, NY: International Baccalaureate Organization, North America and the Caribbean. Web site: [www.ibo.org/myp](http://www.ibo.org/myp).

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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