

Sappington Elementary School

Grades K-5 • St. Louis, Missouri • Public/Suburban
Enrollment 455 • Lindbergh School District

Soaring with Service at Sappington

In its year-long renovation project, Sappington Elementary School added a new building but managed to preserve many of the rich architectural details of the original 1927 structure. Likewise, this imaginative Missouri school added service learning to its already abundant character-building efforts and inspired its students to soar to new heights.

Sappington Elementary School in St. Louis, Missouri, has embraced change as a way of life. To an outsider, an on-going construction project in which the original school building was razed and an impressive addition erected may seem to be the obvious change, but, to an insider, a more important transformation has been taking place over the last five years.

Parent Heather Buettner, whose two older sons and daughter attended Sappington, can readily attest to a change in school culture: “My younger daughter is there now, and she is much more conscious of the importance of making good decisions. Both girls actually talk about doing the right thing. It’s become an intrinsic part of the school.” First-grade teacher Kaye Rueschhoff, a nine-year Sappington veteran and former coordinator of its Character Education Team, agrees that “school culture has changed.” She reflects, “Our approach to character education has evolved too, from a teacher-led focus to one that relies on student input.” As one who well knows the territory, Rueschhoff can give multiple examples of student leadership, such as students in the upper grades overseeing the daily school broadcast and her little ones suggesting household chores to support the school’s Adopt a Family drive.



As contributing members of Sappington’s Recycling Committee, students regularly collect and manage recycled products for their school.

Taking Uneasy First Steps

Principal Mary Hogan says, “Five years ago, when I became the principal at Sappington, schools in our Lindbergh School District¹ were just beginning to participate in the Caring School Community program through Characterplus.” Since the teachers were also involved in a Professional Learning Communities grant, they felt conflicted about which direction to take. Hogan looks back on “that first stressful year” and recalls “courageous conversations in staff meetings about how to get to where we all wanted to be.” A graduate of the Leadership Academy in Character Education (LACE), the new principal knew the importance of moving slowly and getting staff buy-in: “We did our best to balance both, and took the best of what we learned in the training we received to blend the programs and create a building that works as a professional learning community that models quality character for all.”

The energetic principal is fond of using the word *purposeful* in describing Sappington’s work in character education. Through planned and

¹Lindbergh School District is a 2008 National District of Character.

intentional effort, staff, students, parents, and community came on board and became active participants. Those purposeful efforts have yielded a rich harvest: School data for the last four years document a steady decline in disciplinary referrals and a consistent improvement in scores in the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). In fact, in each of the last two years, Sappington has been one of the “top 10 state scorers” in at least one of the MAP categories for which it is eligible.

Blending the Old with the New

As the oldest school in the Lindbergh School District (the prototype was a rock schoolhouse dating back to 1868), Sappington has a high regard for its fine traditions and history. The school partners with the Sappington–Concord Historical Society, whose members frequently delight the youngsters with tales and artifacts of “life back when.” Students appreciate their brand new building that houses seven sparkling classrooms, a gym, and a media center, but the ties to the past appear dramatically in the elegant staircase which houses a large display case featuring the Sappington school sign and columns that have been preserved from the original structure.

Sappington’s character-building initiative took a giant leap last year when the staff and students chose *Service Soars at Sappington School* as their new touchstone. Although community service had always been a staple here, the emphasis on correlating actual service with classroom instruction breathed new life into both areas. For example, fifth grader Madeline points out that the Malaria No More project was made more meaningful because she had first learned in class about the spread of the disease and the way in which mosquito nets provide protection. “We had a lot of fun raising money,” says Madeline. “But I really felt what we were doing was going to save lives.” Students usually reflect and journal on their service, and share their ideas about it, at class meetings. Sidney, another fifth grader, adds, “When we did our homeless project, we did a Venn diagram indicating what people have and have not. I realized how lucky we are and why we should help others.”

Having Fun through Student Expression

In looking back on his Sappington School days, sixth-grader John, now a student at Sperrong Middle School, says, “It is a great place where kids can express themselves and have fun doing it.” Helping students to express themselves in a meaningful way is

also part of the Sappington purpose. When a student survey four years ago revealed that students lacked autonomy in decision making, the school held focus groups and staff meetings to shape a plan of action. A student team is now a strong voice in framing character education activities: Students make the announcements on the KSAP daily broadcast, serve as greeters on Family Day and as buddies to students in other grades, and suggest and implement service projects. For example, students were at the helm in devising ways to unroll the Malaria No More project to the individual classrooms and to continue efforts to support the family of a teacher who had died.

The school’s monthly Buddy Day provides a fun-filled way for students to develop leadership



The Proof Is in the Data

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

- Disciplinary referrals have dramatically decreased. From 2004–05 to 2007–08, referrals decreased by 67 percent (from 331 to 110), and suspensions by 52 percent (from 40 to 19).
- From 2004–05 to 2007–08, fights decreased by 71 percent (from 14 to 4), bus referrals by 84 percent (from 135 to 21), and assaults by 80 percent (from 20 to 4).
- Scores in the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) continue to rise in both mathematics (18.3 percent) and communication arts (16.3 percent).
- CHARACTER^{plus} annual assessment of our character education program showed growth in students’ sense of community and utilization of skills; staff exhibited growth in infusion of character into the curriculum and utilization of resources.
- Sappington has met Adequate Yearly Progress goals each year.

skills and for the school to bring different age groups together. The day begins with morning announcements, followed by a short video clip that shows a character situation highlighting the “word of the month.” The clip, in turn, serves as a springboard to dynamic class meetings in which students discuss the scenario and posit solutions. Next, it’s off to the gym for a team-building activity for the buddy classes while the student Character Education Team gathers

PRINCIPAL'S BEST PICKS:

Mary Sue Hogan

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *caring and committed*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: Buddy Day program, an all-encompassing monthly school-wide activity

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: disciplinary statistics that demonstrate an improvement in student behavior

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: consistent improvement of student performance in Missouri Assessment Program (MAP)

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Start with a small team of passionate folks who are committed to developing a high-quality, data-driven character program. Provide them with quality staff development and time to work on the goals and objectives they create and to involve the rest of the staff.*

in the library for a planning meeting. The day concludes with students completing a buddy project together. Sappington makes certain that parents are included in all activities, and Buddy Day is no exception. Parents receive copies of the day's scenario so the discussion can continue at home.

Teachers as Role Models

Teachers are very conscious of their roles as caring mentors and role models to the children. Not only does the counseling staff teach the students how to use "I messages" to de-escalate conflicts, but grade-level teams plan specific character connections to the curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to present new ideas. Physical education teacher Mary Driemeyer shares her efforts to establish a service-learning partnership with a buddy school in Alaska, an idea she developed after reading the book *Recess at 20 Below*.

Driemeyer believes it would be exciting for Sappington students to exchange ideas with children experiencing playtime in frigid temperatures. She has already begun correspondence and a live Web cast with a teacher there and is looking for the partnership to develop.

Students enthusiastically point out ways that their teachers help them to grow. Megan, a second grader in Laura Hilgendorf's class, says, "If it's a really big problem, we see the counselor. But the teachers really want us to learn how to solve our own problems." Sam, another second grader, tells how he learned a lesson on the day of the Big Run in gym. After the teacher informed him he would have to sit it out because he was wearing Crocs shoes, which were not safe for running, he felt angry. But, fortunately, teachers at Sappington are well versed in the art of conflict management. Sam adds with a smile, "I worked it out together with the teacher so that I could walk instead of run."

Getting Everyone on Board

Hogan says, "Through our parent group, we had great buy-in immediately. Our parent leader on the team was the president of that group. She brought the initiatives to the parent board, and they supported character education with their fiscal resources and formed a separate sub-group to work in conjunction with our teacher-led group. Over the four years, that relationship has continued to grow, and they have implemented their own ideas to support character in the schools." An innovative idea proposed by parents, the Buddy Family program (a 2006 Promising Practice), provides a welcoming dinner as well as continued support to new families and their children. Students are also part of the program, serving as guides and friends for the new students. Sidney says, "I love it because I got paired up with Jessica, and we soon became close friends."

Parents are grateful for the many positive results of character education. Michele Podgornik talks about how her children, a fifth grader and a third grader, have really developed an acceptance of

Sappington Elementary School Character Words

respect	integrity	self-control	responsibility
peace	patience	honesty	caring
service	cooperation	courage	goal setting

people's differences, thanks to the diversity of the community and the way students are taught to treat others. Jeanne Hoose, the mother of an 11-year-old with Down syndrome, tells about a time her son had difficulty going down stairs and a class patiently waited for him. He ended up being first in line, and the rest of the students followed behind. Parents Tom and Judy Girard like how the school's report card makes behavior and character connections to academics: "Other schools focus on academics at the expense of character." Parent Donna McNamara states that the school's emphasis on character also extends to sports, helping "parents and coaches to behave politely and fairly to their children and to one another."

Just as parents are grateful for the impact of character education on their families, the principal praises the parent group as "a supportive partner": "Their commitment to the character program has helped us make the great gains we have seen in the last few years. Through everyone's efforts, we have created a climate where children can grow and learn."

No one is overlooked in the character-building effort. Hogan meets with the bus drivers and support staff every year to ensure they feel included and are doing their part. With the help of the Sappington Parent Teacher Group (SPTG), the school prepared a PowerPoint presentation for the bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and support staff so all are on the same page. Custodian George Noble sums up the Sappington spirit: "I know a building is just a building. Add students, and it's just a school. But with dedicated staff and parents, it becomes fantastic. And this school is fantastic!"

Charting the Next Steps

As Sappington begins another year of character education, it will persevere in its passion to grow, to examine what works and what doesn't work, and to plan its next steps in accord with student, staff, and parent responses on Characterplus surveys. One area the school is exploring is the expansion of its student Character Leadership Team to two teams, each with different duties, so more students can be involved in the leadership program. Students have already become trained presenters. At a regional conference last December, they shared how their small focus groups set the direction for character initiatives in the school.

In terms of outreach, the school has already racked up an impressive record: Its Character

Education Team has presented at the CEP National Forum, Kiwanis International, and the local Character Education Symposium. And as a result of being named a National School of Character this year, Sappington officials will be spending some time on the road, sharing the secrets of implementing a program that originally addresses the specific needs of the school and is willing to change when it recognizes a new need. The Sappington team stresses overcoming the fear of failure: "At Sappington Elementary School, our character evolution has been anything but easy and quiet. It has been full of trial and error. We have taken our staff and our families out of their comfort zone and changed our approach to everything we do...our school has evolved into a learning community bursting with character education that reaches and touches everything and everyone."



Sappington students and teachers enthusiastically encourage one another during the all-school Relay for Life.

REFERENCES

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mary Sue Hogan, Principal
Sappington Elementary School
11011 Gravois Road
St. Louis, MO 63126

Telephone: (314) 729-2400, ext. 6400
E-mail: mhogan@lindberghschools.ws
Web site: www.lindbergh.k12.mo.us