

Valley Park Middle School

Grades 6–8 • Valley Park, Missouri • Public/Suburban
Enrollment 236 • Valley Park School District

Just Flooded with Character

When the swelling Meramec River threatened to breach a levee last spring, the Valley Park Middle School staff, students, and community united as a family to sandbag the school and move materials and furnishings. Their selfless teamwork prompted faculty member Erin Steinkamp to quip: “We are just flooded with character.”

Dr. Tad Savage, the personable principal of Valley Park Middle School, located about 20 miles southwest of St. Louis, is not a man who is easily flustered. Just a week before the CEP site visitors were slated to arrive last year, the raging Meramec threatened to flood his school. All sorts of laborious precautions were taken, but the Meramec never did wreak havoc. Still, Savage had to face the onerous task of putting his school back in

order in just two days. The good doctor was not worried, however, for he had a very formidable force on his side—the Valley Park Middle School family.

“We have had amazing community support that simply blows me away. Not only did we have teachers, guest teachers, students, and nearby residents helping sandbag the building, but they all showed up again to help ‘unwrap’ the building,” says Savage. By the time the visitors arrived—thanks also to support teams sent by the nearby districts of Rockwood, Francis Howell, and Northwest—the only signs of the projected flood were sandbags artistically arranged as mementos in the main hallway.

The media made much of this amazing display of solidarity, but Savage and his staff knew that this unified effort was the result of five years of deliberate and consistent effort, the upshot of carefully planned and implemented character initiatives that changed Valley Park Middle School from “just another school” into a compassionate family whose members care deeply for one another.

Expressing the Need for Belonging and Autonomy

The irony is that the absence of such a bond turned out to be the catalyst for developing a strong character education program. In 2003, when the school was selected as one of 64 Missouri schools to participate in the Missouri Show Me Characterplus Implementation Study, a survey of students revealed that they lacked a sense of belonging and autonomy. The School Leadership Team (SLT) soon came into existence and received summer training in Columbia, Missouri. Next, it created informative in-service sessions for the rest of the staff, keeping uppermost in its approach the need for faculty buy-in and student and parental engagement.

Savage says, “The first year was simply to build a base.” Once the faculty bought in, the SLT moved to the next level, involving the parents and community, and eventually narrowing the list of ethical values to 12 that gained acceptance by all. To secure wider support for its work, the SLT sought and received the explicit approval of the superintendent of schools and the board of education.



Members of Valley Park's girls basketball team at the annual fall parent banquet

The principal reflects, “The sense of belonging and autonomy that exists in this building today as compared to five years ago is staggering. Students today have a voice, not only in extra-curricular activities like dances and Character Council activities, but also in how we run the building and prepare for the next school year. Many teachers also use student input to develop lessons and activities that help students meet curricular objectives.”

Being in the Kids’ Lives

Parent Judy Calkins observes, “Tad and [guidance counselor] Bob Hagen are rarely in their offices. They’re in the kids’ lives.” Savage’s firm belief that “teachers and students have to develop trusting relationships with each other in order for children to be successful in school” appears to be contagious, for student after student interviewed could give a personal anecdote about a caring teacher. In the summer all teachers make home visits to develop relationships with their school families.

The small size of the school and its proximity to the other district schools (elementary, middle, and high school share a campus) engenders a small-town feeling. Seventh grader Zack notes, “Since it’s smaller, we get a lot of one-on-one with the teachers.” Newcomers, like eighth grader Kyle, who came to Valley Park at the beginning of this school year, find the school welcoming: “If you’re open and honest, you’ll make friends real quick. It’s like a home away from home. Here you’re accepted.”

Students bond with their teachers and each other during classroom instruction, extra-curricular activities, and their advisory period, called Hawk Time. Teacher teams meet regularly to plan Hawk Time activities and subject-area lessons as well as to share best practices. Hawk Time, which is also utilized for structured and unstructured class meetings, has been the inspiration for many student-created and -implemented service-learning projects.

Laughter and giggling abound when students describe their service projects. Candy Shaiboon’s seventh graders, known as the Shaiboon Super Stars, worked together to clean up Simpson Park, a favorite summer gathering spot. Sue Biffignani’s sixth graders, proudly calling themselves Biff’s Brilliant Ones, chose a different route. They made cards, crafts, and pictures for patients at the Bethesda Dilworth Nursing Home and St. Anthony’s Hospice. The Read, Right, and Run Marathon, the ingenious project of Christina Straatmann’s group, called for a



The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Valley Park Middle School:

- 62 percent decline in the number of PIC (Positive Intervention Center) days, from a high of 843 in 2003–04 to a low of 323 in 2007–08
- 73 percent decline in the number of OSS (out-of-school suspension) days, from a high of 356 in 2003–04 to a low of 95 in 2007–08
- Improvement in grades: seven percent increase in the number of A’s and B’s from 2003–04 to 2006–07; decrease of five percent in D’s and F’s for the same period
- Continuous improvement in overall Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) scores in communication arts and mathematics; listed as one of Missouri’s Top Improved Schools in communication arts
- Recipient of Missouri School Improvement Distinction in Performance in 2006 and 2007
- High degree of satisfaction with the school, as indicated by CHARACTERplus annual surveys of parents, staff, and students
- Significant increase in implementation of the Eleven Principles, as shown by results of the Missouri Show Me CHARACTERplus Implementation Study over the past five years

three-fold contribution: reading books, doing the right thing, and running a distance. The culminating activity was the big five-mile race. Since the St. Louis Marathon was scheduled for the following Sunday, the participants were able to run on a section of the marathon course. Biffignani, who has been at Valley Park for 17 years, notes that the students become totally engrossed in these projects: “Character is part of everyday life around here. We all work together as a team.”

New Ways to Address Multiple Needs

“You don’t work *for* Tad Savage; you work *with* him,” observes Hagen. This harmonious relationship has resulted in the development of many innovative ways to address the needs of a diverse student body. Forty-eight of the students come from inner city St. Louis, taking part in the Voluntary Transfer Student (VTS) program. All are considered an integral part of the student body. Parent Beth Venturella states, “They

Valley Park Middle School Core Ethical Traits

cooperation	peace	courage	self-control
respect	compassion	perseverance	tolerance
responsibility	integrity	citizenship	honesty

are our kids too,” and feels “bad when any of them leave.” Derek, a sixth grader who has attended Valley Park since first grade, feels part of the school and observes, “This school has better resources.”

Valley Park has modeled its approach to discipline on the Social Skills program of Boys Town (a 2007 NSOC) that incorporates core ethical values into everyday behavior and provides feedback and learning opportunities for students. The Boys Town Model, rooted in the principles of applied behavioral analysis and social learning, involves four main tenets: to monitor one’s feelings, to control impulses, to empathize with others, and to delay gratification.

The school also uses the Truancy and Academic Assist Group (TAAG) program, which is run with the help of Judge Judy Schrader and a bailiff from Family Court of St. Louis County. This powerful

program assists students who might “fall through the cracks” in achieving success, not only in behavior but also in academics. The judge discusses goals and work ethics with the students, and teachers keep the judge informed on academic and behavioral progress through weekly reports. At a typical session, facilitated by Hagen, returning high school students share their successes. Candace, a student who had almost failed middle school, now has a 4.26 G.P.A. The students listen attentively to Candace’s message: “Get involved. It builds your responsibility.” Izzy delivers similar advice: “It doesn’t matter what grade you are in. Don’t give up. Find a way; persevere.” Tyler, another successful student, shows how his involvement in the Student Council and sports has made him “feel better” about himself and taught him “personal responsibility.” Savage concludes the session with an explanation of multiple ways to be successful: “You do have to work hard and stay in school. But I am also successful with my family, [as] a good husband and a good father. It is more than a career and a job. It is about being a good person.” Follow-up statistics show that the high school students who have participated in TAAG while in middle school have increased their G.P.A. by an average of 10.3 percent.

Students “Owning” the School

In planning initiatives, the SLT has taken deliberate steps to allow students a voice in the school and a sense of ownership. Calkins notes that “the kids know it’s their school” and points to the many opportunities students have to assume leadership. Every class generates its own set of rules, and every student has a right to express ideas at class meetings. Since all teachers receive training in class-meeting protocol, meetings run smoothly and fairly. Derek points out that “all students’ ideas are written down,” and Kyle, another sixth grader, observes that “no one is left out.” The Breakfast Club, a group of students who meet periodically for breakfast with the principal, provides another outlet for the student voice.

Students have multiple opportunities for leadership roles within the school. Trained Peer Mediators



PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS:

Dr. Tad Savage

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *kindhearted and compassionate*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: existing programs like TAAG and new programs like Peer Mediation, but, most of all, the way the staff and kids have embraced character education

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL CLIMATE: a school atmosphere that immediately makes you feel comfortable

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: being named one of Missouri’s Top Improved Schools in communication arts; receiving Missouri School Improvement Distinction in Performance in 2006 and 2007

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *Listen to the children, parents, and community. Get their input, and work together for the betterment of the school and what is best for kids.*

assist students in solving conflicts, and the student-run Character Council gives ideas to the staff on areas for change or improvement. Many initiatives depend on student leadership to achieve success. For example, Steinkamp's advisory, Steinkamp's Shooting Stars, guided the November "Mix It Up" lunch in which students from different grades socialized with one another at lunch.

Classroom instruction also calls for strong student engagement and a curricular connection with character building. The school participates in the Enhancing Missouri's Instructional Networked Teaching Strategies (eMINTS) program that enriches instruction and motivates students through innovative instructional strategies powered by technology. Steinkamp, who uses the program with her social studies classes, believes it helps students "get excited about learning" and helps them develop "questioning minds." Moral issues often arise in class discussions, and students are challenged to explore complex issues. For example, a science class may discuss the importance of honesty in research, and a communication arts class may debate the ethical behavior of famous people that they have researched.

Cooking up Character in the Future

Each year the SLT, with input from staff and students, decides on a theme that serves as the overarching guide for the year. Last year's *Cooking up Character* was a particularly apt choice because it served as a reminder that students, staff, parents, and community are all essential ingredients of a successful school. Valley Park Middle School will continue with its mission to include everyone in the next steps of its journey as a National School of Character. Savage reflects, "What is best for kids? That is what drives our character education program. At VPMS our kids need strong role models and adults that they can build relationships with. Once you have the relationships, the character education program and test scores all fall right into line."

Hawk Time, which has been so successful in creating caring relationships, will continue its emphasis on service learning, with students choosing and implementing the community projects. Next year all advisories will read *Seedfolks* by Newbery Medal winner Paul Fleischman. This amusing novel about building community, making choices, and "turning trash into treasure" will serve as a springboard to many stimulating discussions about understanding cultural differences. The principal also hopes to use



VPMS students participate in a National Guard team-building exercise.

some of the NSOC grant money to provide copies of the novel to nearby Sacred Heart School and the Twin Oaks Community Presbyterian School so that their students can also join the discussions.

Five years ago, the Valley Park Middle School faculty was surprised to learn that its students lacked a sense of belonging and autonomy. Following the lead of an insightful principal and a committed core team, the faculty has participated in training each summer to devise ways for the students to develop as movers and doers. What is truly amazing is that the students, 50 percent of whom are on free or reduced-cost lunch, have fulfilled their teachers' dreams. They have overcome their socio-economic status to become strong academic performers who consistently manifest good character. Savage adds, "Everything that we had hoped our character education program would do has come true."

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