

Wilton Manors Elementary School

Grades PreK-5 • Wilton Manors, Florida • Public/Urban

Enrollment 610 • Broward County Public Schools

Traveling with a Passport to Peace

For students at Wilton Manors Elementary School in southern Florida, each year becomes an amazing journey to peace. The Passport to Peace initiative guides a very diverse student body to develop “attitudes” characteristic of good global citizens. Academically rigorous, this Title I school is amazing in another way too: Its rating by the state of Florida soared from D to A.

The members of the Wilton Manors City Commission leaned forward, listening attentively to the young speakers. First an instructive PowerPoint presentation, then a poignant plea for the preservation of the environment. By the conclusion of the session, the City Commissioners were

shaking their heads in awe as the presenters urged the city to form an “Earth Club.”

This scenario does not seem so unusual, except for one major detail: The presenters were members of the Student Council at Wilton Manors Elementary School, and the oldest speaker was just in fifth grade. This magnet school with a 78 percent minority population has deliberately set out to mold students into thinking individuals with a strong sense of self and an equally strong commitment to helping others. An observation of its young citizens in action demonstrates that the school is achieving its goal.

That any elementary school is able to achieve such a goal is remarkable, but it is truly extraordinary to achieve it in a Title I school in which 72 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. And yet, seven years ago, a visitor to this Broward County school in the “island city” of Wilton Manors just north of Fort Lauderdale would have deemed such an achievement to be an impossible dream.

Dreaming the Impossible Dream

Principal Mark Narkier says, “In an age of accountability and high-stakes testing, what is different about our school is its focus on the whole child.” That focus is the result of much research on the way children learn and the commitment of a core leadership team that knew Wilton Manors had to change in order to survive. It was Narkier’s predecessor, Dr. Eileen Wills, with the help of the new counselor Ana Maria Leon and new behavior specialist Tynne Hogan, who activated the dream.

September 11, 2001, proved to be a pivotal day for our nation—and for Wilton Manors as well. In the days that followed the attack, grade-level team leaders met with counselors and administrators to discuss the escalating anxiety of the children as well as their poor test performance. The group created a needs assessment for teachers, parents, and students and researched disciplinary referrals as baseline data. Leon, named Florida Counselor of the Year in 2007, adds, “We conducted study groups and discussed brain research to understand how the brain



Wilton Manors students showing respect in the cafeteria

downshifts when a child feels threatened. We learned that students can't focus on core academics when they are in a fight-or-flight mode. This knowledge was essential to our faculty's understanding of the overwhelming need for character education, not only to improve student interactions, but student performance."

By the end of 2001, the Passport to Peace initiative had come into existence. At the beginning of each school year, every child receives a passport to peace on which are printed the 12 "attitudes" that develop lifelong values. Each month, a different attitude becomes part of a school-wide focus, and every child shares a personal experience that demonstrates that attitude. At the end of each year, Leon reviews each child's passport to determine the successful demonstration of the attitudes. Students celebrate their accomplishments at an International Showcase. Title I coordinator Jan Crouse says, "Passport to Peace has made a difference in our school. Before we adopted it, there were many incidents of aggressive behavior. Kids were in distress and didn't know how to handle it. It has given us tools to succeed in life and made us a family of peacemakers."

Ushering in Another Change: The International Baccalaureate Program

The following year ushered in another change that affected how students learn and behave. Wilton Manors, long a neighborhood school with a dwindling enrollment and a negative image, became a magnet school that participated in the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme. A school of choice with enrollment determined by lottery, the school now emphasizes inquiry-based learning, with a focus on developing higher-order thinking skills and promoting international understanding and socially responsible behavior. Lori Goldsmith, the magnet coordinator, states that the dual emphasis has produced reflective students with a high degree of empathy: "Academic reflection is structured through the International Baccalaureate Programme, and character education and social-emotional learning skills are integrated through the Passport to Peace initiative."

A visit to Wilton Manors demonstrates how the dual emphasis affects daily classroom interactions. For example, a math lesson in Melissa Martinez' first-grade class involves logical reasoning, not rote memorization, as the students enthusiastically explain why one quantity is greater than another.



The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Wilton Manors Elementary School:

- The number of disciplinary referrals specifically for aggressive behaviors decreased by 80 percent, from a high of 211 in 2002–03 to a low of 14 in 2006–07.
- Eighty percent of disciplinary referrals in 2006–07 came from students new to the school and to *Passport to Peace*.
- The school's State of Florida rating improved from D to A.
- Student performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) shows consistent improvement.
- Annual Broward County Public Schools surveys of parents, staff, and students indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the school.
- Wilton Manors has met Adequate Yearly Progress goals in all areas since 2003–04.

The transition to individual work at activity centers seems to take place seamlessly. Quietly, the teacher reminds her students to practice cooperation, one of the twelve attitudes: "We want to prepare ourselves for second grade and for the rest of our lives." In another first-grade room, the little ones, after listening to teacher Andrea Cary read a short vignette about "Mother's Shattered Bowl," are working collaboratively to find the best solution for repairing it.

The school's stress on higher-order thinking and outcome-based learning is evident in the culminating Wilton Manors activity, the fifth-grade Exposition Project. Spending four to five months on their projects, students develop questions, do the research, posit solutions, and make presentations to parents. Among the many topics suggested by students are women's rights, slavery, the Holocaust, bullying, famine, and animal abuse. Students have support from a cadre of 23 mentors, many of whom are staff volunteers. The students in Cindy Diamond's fifth-grade class created their own Web site with amusing podcasts about the "Wide World of Trade." Learning can be fun, shown by the witty stories tracing the evolution of such sundry articles as the yo-yo, the skateboard, and blue jeans. Fifth-grade student Ariel captures her school's concept of learning in one word: "awesome."

Wilton Manors Elementary School Passport to Peace Attitudes

appreciation	cooperation	empathy	integrity
commitment	creativity	enthusiasm	respect
confidence	curiosity	independence	tolerance

Learning to Make a Difference

“We have loads of opportunities to get involved here. The teachers and Mr. Narkier really listen to what we say,” notes fifth grader Esterland, who has served as the parliamentarian of the Student Council, in which all grades have representation. A strong voice in school affairs, the Council designed, distributed, and aggregated a survey last year about school climate that focused on bullying, caring, aggression, and intolerance. Members incorporated the results into a PowerPoint presentation to teachers, parents, and students. A follow-up survey will determine if “the school and the kids have gotten better or not.”

The Student Council, though, is not the only leadership group. Third graders initiated the school-wide Character Patrol Club that provides positive reinforcement to students who are doing the right things. Students in Jodi Hansen’s third-grade class

describe the rationale: “Well, kids used to hear they were doing something wrong in the cafeteria, but then we came up with the idea that we should tell them when they were doing something right. We figured out they would learn better that way.” Other leaders, known as Safety Patrols, have the responsibility of watching out for the younger students and seeing that the rules are being followed.

Parent-teacher conferences also take on a different twist at Wilton Manors. On Student Success Night, each student leads his or her own conference and provides evidence of work from an on-going portfolio. Thus it should come as no surprise that students work both in front of and behind the camera on the daily Morning Show that deals with timely issues in addition to the customary announcements. For example, during National Autism Week, the show presented concrete facts about students with special needs and highlighted Wilton Manors’ efforts for students with autism. Providing additional creative outlets are the many clubs before and after school that are supported by the 21st Century Learning Program and treated as extensions of the social and academic school day. Esterland adds that the Drama Club proved to be her favorite, particularly her “role as Oprah Winfrey.”

“We don’t need your money...Our kids need your time”

When Narkier assumed the reins as principal three years ago, he wisely chose to retain the reforms made by his predecessor and to listen to the staff, students, parents, and community in planning the next steps. His collaborative style has brought positive results. The parents and community group agree that “Mr. Narkier includes everyone.” He often speaks in the community and is considered a leader. His message and mantra—“We don’t need your money...Our kids need your time!”—has motivated many parents and organizations to join the effort.

The International Baccalaureate Programme calls for strong parental and community support. Wilton Manors has at least 11 community



PRINCIPAL’S BEST PICKS:

Mark Narkier

TWO WORDS TO DESCRIBE YOUR SCHOOL: *whole-child focused*

CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM/PROJECT OF WHICH YOU ARE MOST PROUD: Passport to Peace

BEST PROOF THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION CHANGES SCHOOL

CLIMATE: soft data such as positive feedback from parents, volunteers, and visitors; hard data such as survey results and disciplinary statistics

EVIDENCE THAT CHARACTER EDUCATION HAS ENHANCED ACADEMIC

ACHIEVEMENT: improvement in the rating imposed by the State of Florida, from a D to an A, and retention of the A rating for 5 years

WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:

First consider your school culture and its needs. The principal, administration, and staff have to believe in the program and fully support it in order to be successful.

partnerships, and the number is growing. Leon states, “When people come into the school, they like it so much that they stay. Last year, volunteers contributed over \$30,000 in time and in goods.” For example, Bridget Pierce, a city employee, decided to try volunteering for a day. Not only is she here two years later, but she has also influenced six more people from her office to volunteer, and she is “presently working on her boss.” Anissa Coleman, a community representative from Publix Grocery, observes that the “attitudes” emphasized in the school have a strong correlation with job performance. Helen Licker, a volunteer for the past three years, enjoys working with the students directly and delights in dressing up as a ladybug for storytelling. Licker reflects, “I wish my grandchildren could come here. Everything is so balanced that children get everything they need.”

Wilton Manors holds a host of parent workshops and sends out all communications in three languages: Spanish, Creole, and English. In a powerful tribute to the school’s culture of caring, Irma Argueta, a Spanish-speaking parent, declares, “The best thing about this school is the communication. Teachers help my boys, and the teachers help me.”

A Look into the Future

Wilton Manors will continue to assess its program each year and to improve it as needs change. Last year it began working with two other schools in the district, Broadview Elementary and Morrow Elementary, to “give them a little boost” and “to take their character education program to the next level.” Narkier provided release time for his staff to model strategies for the two schools to improve; next on the agenda will be the sharing of techniques to enhance student–student and student–adult interactions. Interested in extending the character-building process at Wilton Manors in still another direction, Narkier adds that his team would like to mentor Sunrise Middle School, so that the strides the students have made while in elementary school will not be lost when they enter sixth grade.

Always with an eye to global networking, the principal adds, “We also want to share our program with others abroad. We have shared our successes already by presenting at national and international conferences, including [in] Spain and Ecuador.”

Each fall, Wilton Manors Elementary celebrates its Passport to Peace program and its



Students work together at Wilton Manors to create the artwork for Spirit Day shirts.

accomplishments in promoting harmony by holding a Walk for Peace. Last year over 400 people from school and community joined in the celebration, which received the financial support of 14 organizations. The proceeds traditionally go toward efforts to promote activities that foster tolerance in students and to help needy families get through the holidays with dignity. Now that Wilton Manors Elementary School has achieved NSOC status, the students hope that the 2008 Walk for Peace will be more like a parade. After all, a school that has students representing 24 different nations and that has consistently beaten the odds deserves celebrity treatment.

REFERENCES

International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme. New York, NY: International Baccalaureate Organization, North America and the Caribbean. Web site: www.ibo.org/pypp.

Passport to Peace. West Palm Beach, FL: Hanley Center Prevention Services. Web site: www.passporttopeace.net.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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