2009 Winners

Beverly Woods Elementary School

Grades K–5 ★ Enrollment 808 ★ Charlotte, North Carolina ★ Public/Suburban ★ Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools

Working Together, Hand in Hand

Never look down on someone unless you are helping them up. This inspirational message, which accompanies a student mural in this caring North Carolina school, epitomizes its approach to character. Students demonstrate strong academic achievement while consistently helping those in need, both inside and outside school.

“K”evin won a medal. Kevin won a medal.” When parent Liz Daniel heard her third-grade son Jake, a peer buddy, rush home breathlessly with the news that his friend had won a medal in the Special Olympics, she knew that Beverly Woods Elementary School was truly developing young people of character.

A student’s willingness to help another and to take pride in that individual’s accomplishment is not unusual at this Charlotte–Mecklenburg school, the third in its district to gain NSOC status (after Cornelius, 2005, and McKee Road, 2006). Story after story reveals bonding between buddies in this inclusion model school. A peer buddy is a coveted role sought by general education students, and students with special needs thrive in regular classes with the help and friendship extended by their peer buddies (a 2008 Promising Practice). Monique, a fourth-grade peer buddy, says, “I feel real good, because it’s helping people that have problems, but it doesn’t seem like they have a problem.” Another peer buddy, third-grade student Jakob, sums up the experience: “It feels great to learn science and social studies with our EC [special needs] friends! It is great for them to be with us, so we can help them and they can learn new things. Sometimes they teach us new things!”

Special education teacher Barbara Putnam is teary-eyed when she describes the support her students with disabilities receive when participating in the Special Olympics three times a year: “On the day of the competition, the other classes line the halls and cheer for the athletes as they board the buses. When we return to the school, the participants are again met with cheers as the classes line the halls to congratulate all the athletes.” Putnam adds, “Never have I been in a school in which the special needs children are embraced with such love and positive reinforcement.”

BUILDING CHARACTER THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

It is not just students with special needs that Beverly Woods nurtures; a spirit of caring extends to all—students, staff, and the wider community. Principal Caroline Horne gives a high priority to building relationships: “If you have the relationship piece, children will learn.” Student services specialist Kristen Danusis, who co-chairs the Character Education Committee, points out that an accent on relationships has helped the school’s character program to evolve from just “an add-on program” based on Steven Covey’s principles to “an initiative that defines who we are.” In addition to promoting North Carolina’s monthly character traits, Beverly Woods accents the “3 R’s”—respect, restraint, and responsibility—in its rituals, its curriculum, and its behavioral code.

“Everyone is looking out for everyone else,” say staff members in describing the family atmosphere of Beverly Woods. Third-grade teacher Loretta Buck says, “To teach this [character education], you have to live it.” Principal intern Latoya Williams shares that she “felt so embraced, and respected as a person” from the moment she began work here. Many social opportunities exist for teachers to bond with one another, and diverse professional
Each year Beverly Woods has made great strides in improving student experiences and outcomes. A 2008 student survey showed that 85 percent of students felt that their school was a safe environment. Out-of-school suspensions dropped by one-third from 2007–08 to 2008–09. One reason for this decrease is the school’s Intervention Team, which achieved a 97 percent success rate in improving student achievement and correctly identifying students in need of special education, compared to the district’s success rate of 64 percent for its Intervention Teams. Since the anti-bullying curriculum was introduced, disciplinary referrals have decreased by approximately 75 percent. The results of a school-wide survey revealed that 100 percent of staff, 95 percent of parents, and 86 percent of fifth graders surveyed rated our school as “a safe environment.”

The school’s Intervention Team observed best practices in other classes and sharing as teachers are given release time to work at Beverly Woods Elementary School: working at Beverly Woods Elementary School.

How we know character education is working at Beverly Woods Elementary School:

- Beverly Woods has met its State of North Carolina ABC goals and has been deemed a School of Distinction because 84.4 percent of its students met the state’s requirements for yearly growth or high growth in the 2008–09 school year.
- The school’s Intervention Team achieved a 97 percent success rate in improving student achievement and correctly identifying students in need of special education, compared to the district’s success rate of 64 percent for its Intervention Teams.
- Since the anti-bullying curriculum was introduced, disciplinary referrals have decreased by approximately 75 percent.
- The results of a school-wide survey revealed that 100 percent of staff, 95 percent of parents, and 86 percent of fifth graders surveyed rated our school as “a safe environment.”
- A 2008 student survey showed that 85 percent of fifth graders and 93 percent of fourth graders reported that other students at school have made them feel good about themselves.
- The 2008 School Quality Review of the Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools by Cambridge Educators, Inc. rated the school at the highest level in the areas of “Learning Environment” and “Involvement of Parents and the Community.”
- Each year Beverly Woods has approximately 1,600 parent and community volunteers that come to assist with students’ learning.

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at Beverly Woods Elementary School:

Richard Avossa, an area superintendent for Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools, says that character education is “the vision and the mission of this school.” Beverly Woods gives its students many tools to share that vision and practice that mission. Character building takes many forms at this school: direct instruction, class meetings, focus weeks, curricular connections, and service projects.

Third-grade teacher Karen Teddy says that each teacher receives a binder with character lessons as well as a list of books that correlate with the traits. Volunteers from the Parent Connection receive training to teach lessons too, and the parent and the teacher often work together to strengthen a presentation. Teddy says they are alert to seizing “teachable moments,” because “life doesn’t go by a binder.” Character lesson topics include tattling, bullying, being a good friend, coping with divorce, and enhancing social skills. Class meetings serve as a way to air concerns and develop the student voice. For example, students in Loretta Buck’s third-grade class conclude their meeting with a reflection on what went well and what they would like to see happen differently.

Specially focused weeks such as Stand Up to Bullies Week and Inclusion Week reinforce the school’s commitment to developing caring and tolerant citizens. Interviews with students indicate they have internalized this message. Miles, a third grader, says that “students care for each other,” and Edwin, another third grader, agrees that “kids are nice” and “friends stand up for each other.”

When fourth-grade student Luke is asked what he would do if he saw bullying, he responds quickly, “I just get the courage and go up and tell them to stop bullying.”

Character connections are strong, and teachers tie in values with literature or motivate students to design projects that express their concerns. For example, students in a third-grade class, guided by talent development teacher Marni Cartiff, contrast living in Charlotte with the tropical setting of the book The Great Kapok Tree, and students in Jay Menkin’s fourth-grade class make models depicting global warming. One of Menkin’s students, Harrison, who is engaged in taking energy surveys throughout the school, says, “People are seeing what we are doing in this school. Imagine what the whole world can do.”

Changing the World Through Service

Harrison is right: The people of Charlotte are watching Beverly Woods closely, and parents and community are following the school’s lead in its commitment to serve those in need. Students have been involved in service projects that run the gamut from purchasing livestock for the poor through Heifer International to sending letters and supplies to the troops. Service is indeed learning at Beverly Woods, but
it is also fun. Students enjoy describing their favorite projects: Fifth grader Mary tells how her Girl Scout troop painted the mural about helping, and third grader Genna describes the steps in planting shade trees on Earth Day.

To develop continuity and curricular connections in its service projects, the school has chosen to concentrate on two local charities: the Urban Ministry Center and A Child’s Place. Liz Clasen-Kelly, director of the Urban Ministry, which serves the needy in Charlotte, praises the work of the students in a year-long project of making sandwiches for the Ministry’s soup kitchen. Rose proudly points out that “first graders managed to make 700 sandwiches last year."

“Service is always tied to the curriculum,” says parent Alicia Gagnon, who has been an active force in many projects. Gagnon reports that representatives from A Child’s Place, which helps homeless families, visited the school before the first of three fundraisers. Not only did the representatives dispel the usual stereotypes associated with the homeless, but they also read relevant stories to the children and answered questions. Parent Jane Hoagland shares that “the kids are driving it [the fundraisers]. My kids are saving their own money.”

**THE PRINCIPAL’S CORNER:**

**Caroline Horne**

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** Develop a long-range plan on how to implement the initiative. Begin with some key players in the school as well as parents and community members who are committed to and excited about character education. Their energy and success will be contagious. Don’t get bogged down by the few that are reluctant to get on board. At some point they will get on board, willing or not. Set realistic but clear expectations for staff members on the school’s commitment to character education.

**SERVING AS A BEACON TO OTHER SCHOOLS**

In the five years that Beverly Woods has stepped up its character education initiative, Horne has seen consistently high academic success, positive safety and satisfaction ratings from all school stakeholders, a significant decrease in disciplinary referrals, and low teacher-turnover rates. Eager to spread the word that character education works, the Character Education Committee looks forward to its outreach as a National School of Character. The teachers, whom the 2008 Quarterly Review of Beverly Woods praises for showing “a tremendous commitment to the school and its students,” want to share some of the strategies that have made character education the foundation of all they do.

As for the Beverly Woods students, they never sit idly by. They have demonstrated leadership by participating in the school’s Mini-Society (a 2007 Promising Practice) as peer buddies, student ambassadors, safety patrols, peer mediators, and service activists. Now that the passion to serve is in their blood, they undoubtedly will convert others to the cause. A visitor to this school will agree that Horne has chosen her welcoming words well: “I am honored to be principal of a school where genuine love for children, high expectations, and character building are a priority.”

**REFERENCES**


**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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Beverly Woods students with disabilities and their peer buddies prepare to perform at Bojangles Arena for the Special Olympics Opening Ceremony.