Going Above and Beyond

An unrelenting focus on academic achievement and character development is the driving force of this inner-city Milwaukee public charter school. Its African-American student body has transcended the racial achievement gap; their scores on Wisconsin’s state tests are on a par with or exceed the state-wide averages.

Find a random sampling of students, staff, and parents at Milwaukee College Prep School, an inner-city public charter school, and ask them to describe what makes their school so special. Odds are that you will hear the words above and beyond many times.

Ronisha, a seventh grader, says, “Our school is special because it’s a home away from home. It’s a place where you can be yourself and not worry about gangs, violence, and other problems. Our academics are so much better than other schools. We always go above and beyond.” Linnaea Thomas, the elementary dean of students, notes, “The teachers here have a passion for their work, a real commitment. They always are willing to go above and beyond, to give 110 percent for the children.” Grandparent and school volunteer Andrea Reed says, “My grandson has taken his good character outside the school. This school focuses on caring, so the children go above and beyond.”

The school’s philosophy of love and hard work, coupled with a college-bound curriculum, has helped its African-American student body erase—and, in some cases, even reverse—the racial achievement gap. Principal Robert Rauh, who has been at the helm since the school’s founding 12 years ago, emphasizes its mission: In partnership with parents, we provide a nurturing environment of high expectations and accountability that equips all students with the choice to determine their success in life. And the many awards that Milwaukee College Prep has won show that the students have indeed made the right choice. Selected as a Schools That Can model (2007) for its best practices, it has been named the Best Charter School in Wisconsin (2008) and the first Wisconsin State School of Character (2009). Rauh points out, “It is important to keep in perspective the setting in which Milwaukee College Prep’s success takes place. Statistically, our children (99 percent African-American, 66 percent from single-parent homes, and 75 percent low income) have a very slim chance of success.”

PAVING THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Milwaukee College Prep clearly does not leave its students’ “chance of success” to chance. Development director Maggie Broeren calls the framework upon which the school is built “a triangle of students, staff, and parents,” with each sharing responsibilities and nurturing. Broeren, like the rest of the staff, expresses a deep affection for this school, which she describes as “a unique experience in an urban environment.” She adds, “When students come here, they enter a different world, a world of peace, safety, high expectations, and goodness.”

From the outset, Milwaukee College Prep, whose original founders, Ron and Micky Sadoff, still serve as officers on its Board of Directors, made character education a key to the different world they had envisioned for inner-city children. Originally, the character traits were based on character education books or Kwanzaa principles, but by consensus of staff and parents the school eventually adopted five consistent core values: trust, respect,
excellence, courage, and knowledge. Known by the acronym TRECK, these values shape student ideals and behavior.

Elementary students start off their day with an assembly, and middle schoolers begin with circle time. At both of these gatherings, designed to celebrate students and their scholarly work, all students recite the memorized Declaration of Excellence. Poetry, proverbs, and quotations capture the meaning of the TRECK values, and students receive practice in making them a way of life through direct instruction and role playing. In the middle school, advisory classes develop the values in novel ways through proactivity lessons, which are teacher-designed and often student-led activities that teach character traits.

MAKING A POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE WORLD

“The people I work with have common values, missions, and work ethic. They love children and want to make a positive change in the world,” says Jillian Omdahl, a middle school resource teacher and a leader in the Proactivity Design Team. The children follow their teachers in striving to be positive role models. Elementary students try to become Shining Scholars, who present either a character trait or a personal narrative about character at the morning assemblies. As North Star Navigators, students in grades 3–8 have the opportunity to develop leadership skills by serving as peer mediators or school tour guides. Students are also involved in O Ambassadors, a project of Oprah’s Angel Network that empowers young people to dream big and make a difference in the world.

William Davis, the middle school dean and mathematics teacher, says, “I teach respect for self and for others. I try to lead them [the students] to believe that they are leaders, they will succeed, they will not fail.” Students receive inspiration from reading the stories in The Freedom Writers Diary of students who did make a difference by keeping their own diaries. The strong emphasis is on doing one’s best as a way of helping others to be their best. Third grader Trinity understands the message: “The teachers encourage me to do what I want to do, to be the best I can be.”

The words “College Prep” are not just adornments to add glitz to the name; they are intrinsic to the mission of this school, which opens admission to all Milwaukee children (preference, however, is given to siblings of Milwaukee College Prep students). The curriculum is academically rigorous, designed to prepare students for the most prestigious high schools. The Modern Curriculum Press reading series and phonics program and the Saxon Math program are complemented by the Accelerated Math and Accelerated Reader programs from Renaissance Learning. The staff consistently connects learning to life. Elementary curriculum director Kari Whalen says, “Because our students are so engaged in learning, this heads off many problems. There is a spirit in this school that we are all connected. Our teachers are passionate and committed.”

Student successes are celebrated daily in assemblies and “shout-outs.”

One School, One Mission: Middle schoolers are matched with elementary students for monthly learning activities.
CARING TEACHERS, CARING CHILDREN

Principal Rauh notes, “We have a very strong school culture with a great deal of focused and on-task learning taking place, yet there is seldom a voice ever raised in our school building.” Students enthusiastically praise their teachers, for both their personal caring and their teaching abilities. Shaquille, an eighth grader, says, “The teachers are very helpful, and they will always stay late and help me understand school work whenever I need it. The teachers even help me with problems from home.” Sierra, a sixth grader, says, “The teachers are excited when they need to be, and strict when they need to be.” Cydney, a fourth grader, adds, “The teachers are nice, and they go the extra mile to make sure you know what you’re supposed to know.”

Support by staff members does not end at the school door. Poignant stories abound about teachers who have driven students to and from events or taken students for haircuts—and, in one situation, even paid for a student’s orthodontic work. The school also provides the staff with professional growth opportunities and time for sharing and team building through book studies, refresher courses, seminars in differentiated instruction, and weekend retreats for veteran staff. Parents join their children in praise of the way the staff raises the aspirations of the students. Parent John Thomas says, “There is a synergy about this school because the school constantly reinforces that every student is a scholar.”

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Broeren says, “Parents are crucial to our students’ success. Before a child is admitted, we give parents a tour and explain their responsibilities, which are quite rigorous.” Parents must sign a pledge to get students to school on time, to strictly honor the uniform policy, to sign off on their homework, and to participate in mandatory conferences. In addition, parents help with goal setting, assemblies, classroom activities, and lunchroom duties. Tomeica Broske, a parent on the Parent Leadership Council, praises the school’s character building: “We eat, drink, and sleep character every day. We have a commitment to the kids; they are the priority.” Another parent, Arkerkshia Randall, has found personal growth through her work with the school. She says, “Milwaukee College Prep helps me build my character—makes me realize what my responsibilities are. This school has made me the parent that I am.”

The Milwaukee community has also embraced the school, with many foundations and corporations providing funds and time. Through a $6 million capital campaign, the school was able to build additional classrooms as well as a new playground, computer lab, and science lab. Last year more than 70 community volunteers extended their help, working in classrooms and aiding in events. Barbara Rawling, a retired Milwaukee Public Schools teacher and volunteer, says that her experience at Milwaukee College Prep has taught her much about the relationship between high expectations and achievement: “It is so exciting being here. Students know exactly what the expectations are; they are motivated by intrinsic rewards.”

Milwaukee College Prep plans a busy year in outreach as a National School of Character. Broeren says, “It [outreach] is built into our mission.” Since the school has served as a model of best practices, usually two or three dozen interns (including administrators) visit the school annually in search of effective strategies. Milwaukee College Prep showcased its program at the annual Wisconsin State School of Character Conference, in June, and is finalizing plans to mentor other schools, possibly in Illinois as well as Wisconsin.

Both students and parents are confident that this amazing charter school has provided the blueprint for success. Shaquille announces confidently, “Years from now, I’ll tell my kids Milwaukee College Prep is the reason I’m a successful man.”

REFERENCES


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