

through innovative service learning. When a survey revealed an increase in pupil anxiety in regard to test-taking, students took the lead in resolving the concern. They investigated the issue, wrote skits, created a TV broadcast on strategies to reduce anxiety, and shared their findings with the student body. The school's newest service learning project, working with the New Brunswick Chapter of the Ronald McDonald House, a home-away-from-home for families with children

who are undergoing long-term medical treatment, came as a result of 2010 NSOC feedback about connecting service to the curriculum. Dr. Kathleen Hoeker, former principal, states, "The project has evolved and continues to grow, driven by students, with the support of their parents and our staff. Students maintain a reflection journal with entries made after each learning opportunity. These entries document the development of empathy. Their reflections are telling and express a desire for more

opportunities to help others." Ronald McDonald house manager Carol Reynolds is delighted to see that "character doesn't just stop with the school day."

Shepard music teacher Carolyn Kimock is known for urging her pupils to "leave a lasting legacy" and to be "remembered for the positive things" they have done there. The impressive record of service registered by students in all of this year's NSOC indicates that they are heeding Kimock's inspirational advice. ▶

LESSON #4:

Be creative in making parents your partners

Just as the concept of the traditional family has changed drastically in the last decades, so too our 2011 NSOC have pursued some nontraditional approaches to making parents their partners in education. Not only do these schools *seek* the help of the parents as volunteers in the classroom and at home, but they also *give* help to parents in navigating life's turbulent waters. An interesting pattern has emerged in many of this year's NSOC: They identify and address the needs of parents in order to enrich the education of their children.

When the staff of Eldridge Park School in Lawrenceville, New Jersey saw that its Hispanic students in grades 1–3 were not meeting the target areas in reading and math, it created *Latinos Unidos*. In these lively supper meetings, Hispanic families have a chance to mingle with one another, hear a specialist who explains learning strategies they can use at home, ask questions about the school, and meet with successful high school students of their own culture who share what their parents did to help them achieve.

Lives of families at military posts can be quite complicated as they adjust to the "new normal" of multiple deployments,



Uthoff Valley unveils a sign designed by a parent to commemorate being named a National School of Character.

frequent school transitions, and postponed homecomings. Marie Davis, retired principal of Duncan Elementary—one of the four elementary schools at Fort Hood, the military installation that witnessed the 2009 mass shooting—says that students often come to school suffering from an "emotional paralysis." A Military Family Life Consultant provides services to students and families who are struggling, and the Community in School Liaison and the Parent Liaison work with families to help them utilize the available social service agencies. But Davis and her caring staff, realizing that these children need

much more, run many support groups to help students talk about their traumatic experiences and recurring anxiety. Parents such as Andrea Wallace agree they are "blessed to be at Duncan," which also works to ease the lives of its young parents by providing some unusual perks. Since many of the families have no car or only one car, Duncan offers the opportunity of earning a GED on campus in concert with Central Texas College. Teddy Time, an early literacy program, encourages parents to bring their toddlers to school for stories and crafts. The Fort Hood National Bank sponsors the Wooden Nickel store, where parents are able to exchange tokens received from volunteering at the school for much-needed supplies.

Allaying Parental Anxiety

Another school that has intentionally worked to allay the anxiety of parents and children is Oakhurst Elementary in Largo, Florida. As a result of a zoning change, 160 new students joined Oakhurst in 2009–10. Adding to the complexity of the situation was the fact that English was a second language to 24 of those new students, and 109 were economically disadvantaged. Instead of fretting over perceived problems, Oakhurst's Character Committee designed an inclusion strategy. The committee welcomed parents in different languages, paired new students with buddies, gave school tours to parents and children, and extended a special invitation to new students to participate in clubs. The result: An enthusiastic group of parents and

children joined the school, quite eager to embrace its unifying theme, *The Mustang Way*. The PTA, in turn, repaid the school's intentional efforts to include parents by financially supporting its focused anti-bullying initiative, Teaching Children Empathy and the Power of One.

Dr. Gina Siebe, the principal of Bayless Elementary (grades PreK–2) on the south side of St. Louis, has always called on her caring staff to find inventive ways of reaching the parents of her little ones in a school with 43 percent minority and 61 percent economically disadvantaged students, respectively. The school's Practical Parenting Partnership has become a decided hit. Parents are recruited and trained, and become active participants in school events that educate other parents on parenting skills and the importance of academics while engaging families in interesting and lively activities. The school, with a heavy Bosnian population, has capitalized on its powerful ethnic ties: One Bosnian father took it upon himself to recruit other families, and the initiative has seen phenomenal growth.

Rockwood School District in Missouri (a 2006 NSOC) can boast of six NSOC this year: Babler, Bowles, Geggie, Kellison, Uthoff Valley, and Woerther elementary schools. Rockwood, in the business of building character since 1998, is true to its motto, *Doing Whatever It Takes*, particularly in helping working parents. Among the many benefits the district offers are a before- and after-school child care program and an Adventure Club for pupils during the summer and holiday breaks. Parents of the

voluntary transfer students from inner-city St. Louis find a special welcome at Rockwood schools. Amazingly, 100 percent of them were able to participate in Uthoff Valley teacher conferences last year, thanks to the school's arranging for transportation and to its scheduling of phone chats. Geggie and Uthoff Valley teachers also bond with the newcomers by taking turns riding the school bus home with them. Bowles has taken an even more

Whether it is *Being Our Bingham Best*, or *Pembroke Pride*, or *The Pierce Path*, the rallying motif unified each school in defining and fulfilling its mission. With that in mind, the three schools urged parents to craft their own individual touchstones which identified their family's core values, replete with photographs and a motto. The Birmingham community came alive with animated conversations about what

FROM THE PRINCIPAL'S DESK:

“We have put much effort into designing programs that will attract parents. Each grade presents a parent workshop aimed at developing academic and parenting skills. Our ‘Turn Off TV and Exercise with Me Tonight,’ an evening of exercise, nutrition, and wellness, drew a large crowd. We are pleased that our efforts have been recognized and that we were named a National PTA School of Excellence for Parent Involvement.”

—Linda Friedman, Walnut Street School, Uniondale, New York

personalized approach: Its administrators visit the homes of voluntary transfer students before school starts. Initially, there was some trepidation, but now the home visits have become celebrations, attended by grandparents and other family members.

A Touchdown for a Touchstone

Birmingham Public Schools, a district that regards its “unparalleled parental support” as one of its greatest strengths, does not face the problem of parental involvement. In fact, it is not unusual to see five or six parents helping in classrooms or all PTA/PTSA subcommittees filled with volunteers. Whether it is the Proud Dads (a 2005 Promising Practice) repainting a school playground or moms leading the recycling effort to become a Michigan Green School, parents are clearly activists here. Instead, a different question arose last year: How can a school involve parents in taking character building to an even higher level?

All three Birmingham schools that claim NSOC status this year—Bingham Farms, Pembroke, and Pierce elementary schools—talk about the powerful bond that students, staff, and parents felt in designing their schools' individual touchstones.

it means to be a family of character. Pembroke principal Colette Ivey says that developing the new school touchstone “brought our school faculty together,” and Pembroke parent Melissa Caton sees a similar value with the family touchstones because they “created some great discussions at home.” Pierce principal James Lalik reports that students at his school were also excited about engaging their families in conversation about the values that guided them. The “almost 500 Family Paths” now hanging in the hallways at Pierce are tangible proof of the project's success.

Bingham Farms, which sees itself as “soaring with character,” made certain its families received practice in modeling “Bingham Best” behavior by hosting a Character Education Expo at which parents had a chance to practice conflict resolution strategies and discuss character-related literature. Bingham Farms principal Russ Facione, who has been active in district character education since its inception, is proud of these efforts to include parents in such ingenious ways: “The application of core values to adult behavior is very authentic now. It is just part of the fabric of our school and our community.”



Muskogee High hosts a banquet to recognize students in their district for displaying exemplary character.