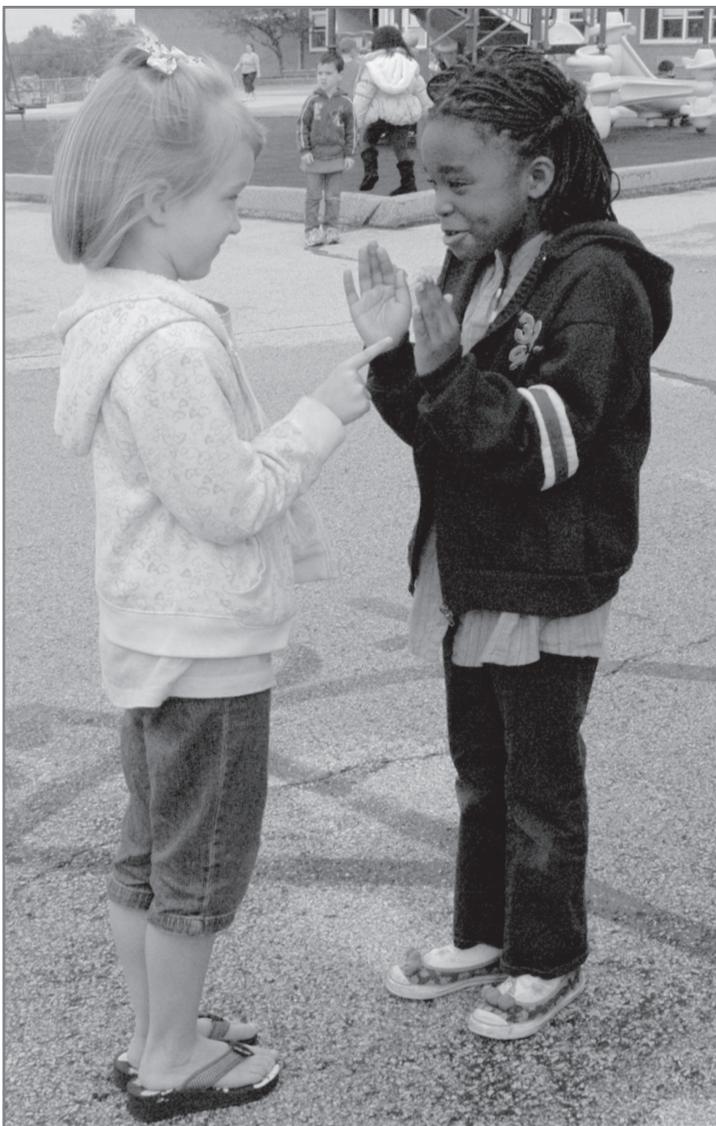


# Volunteer

*Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program*

## Character Education at Bayless Leads to Greater Achievement by Students

By Peggy Magee



It's everywhere, it's everywhere! All throughout Bayless Elementary School, a focus on character development permeates. On hallway and classroom display boards, incorporated into teachers' lessons, from the mouths of students as they recite a daily pledge, even on a corner of the playground designated as Peace Town.

For the 398 students who attend Bayless, including 21 voluntary transfer students, the strong emphasis on respect, responsibility, kindness, perseverance and other core values, is an added bonus. As the children work to improve their self worth – bolstered by continually hearing just how valuable and capable they are – they come to understand that their overall potential, in school and in life, is enhanced by developing positive character traits.

The diversity of this south county school, part of the Bayless School District, is reflected in the fact that 50 percent of its pupils are English Language Learners, representing nearly a dozen different languages. This conclave of cultures might explain the findings of a school survey conducted seven years ago: many of the children felt as though they did not belong.

Prompted by wanting to change that, Principal Gina Siebe, with input from teachers, parents, students and the community, launched in 2005 a comprehensive character education program. As part of this national program administered by CHARACTERplus, the school adopted the Caring School Community model which seeks to develop a "caring community of learners" that effectively promotes students' intellectual, social, and ethical development and teachers' ongoing professional development. "We thought that implementing a character education program would give the children a better sense of belonging, and also improve behavior and reduce office referrals," Dr. Siebe explains. "Plus, we just thought it's what is best for them."

See Inside: **Character Education at Bayless**

Bayless Elementary School students Ava Mesmer, left, and Valerie Nwosu, demonstrate the use of Peace Town, an area of the school playground where students resolve their conflicts using a learned procedure. The rule is that no student can refuse to go to Peace Town when invited by another student. Peace Town is among the many strategies used to instill character education at the school. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

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Fast forward to the present and the awards and accolades Bayless has garnered require a massive bulletin board to display, including being named a 2011 National School of Character, an honor given to only 44 schools nationwide. Even more exciting is that since the program's inception, there have been impressive gains in reading achievement, incidents of bullying and recurring school infractions have decreased significantly and the already high attendance rate improved even more.

The faculty plays a key role – teaching, reviewing and reinforcing character education every chance they get. In music class, for example, teacher Nancy Kickham reminds students to think about safety (walking on risers) and respect (handling instruments). When prompted by their teacher to recite the definition of cooperation, the children do so in unison. Printed on small bean bags are words such as “self-control,” “cooperation,” or “kindness” and depending on which bag Kickham tosses out, it's an indication to the student to revisit the meaning of the word in light of his/her behavior.

Eighteen of the 23 Bayless teachers are certified in character education by CHARACTER*plus*, having participated in an extensive training program where they learned how to integrate character education into the curriculum. Dr. Siebe, who has received advanced leadership certification, explains that her teachers continually encourage students to use their heads, hearts and hands. “Using their heads, they make good choices; using their hearts, they care about others, and using their hands, they perform service learning projects.” Once such project is the clothing swap that second graders organized last fall where they learned about compassion, empathy and kindness. They collected gently used clothing and made it available to parents who could shop for free after parent-teacher conferences.

Prior to earning the top national honor, Bayless had been named a State School of Character three years in a row, plus won several Promising Practices awards for innovative components of its overall program. One such practice is the Bully Box which encourages students to anonymously report a bullying incident to the counselor who then helps with conflict resolution.

Another Bayless practice that has been recognized is Character Carl, a window cling of a little fellow wearing a cap that appears in the front of many businesses in the community. Its purpose is to remind students to use good character traits in the community. Back at school, a hallway display recognizes those students who do, such as Emily Topakovic who showed respect by patiently waiting in line at 7-Eleven.

Demonstrating commendable character qualities outside the school day is deemed as important as doing so during school hours. Thus, there's a push to involve the community. (The nearby Dairy Queen congratulated Bayless on its outside marquee for winning the national award!) Parents also become involved by modeling the character traits at home and reporting on their children's positive behavior (by signing off on a form) so that they can receive recognition at school. A hallway bulletin board makes known, for example, that Eric Huynh helped carry groceries and Violet Mesmer donated her hair to Locks of Love.

“We expect our students to use good character traits at school, at home and in the community,” explains Dr. Siebe. “As demonstrated in all aspects of their lives, we want them to understand, care about and act upon core ethical values. Through our deliberate efforts, we help to make that happen.”

For VICC students, character education is tied to bus behavior and, as a result, there are fewer problems on the bus, according to kindergarten teacher Amy Davis, who heads the character education committee. “When they come here, they are welcomed and loved,” she adds. New students are given a school tour by another student in their grade and are assigned a buddy who eats lunch with them and is a playmate at recess.

“Overall, our character education program gives children intrinsic motivation that leads to improved student behavior, fewer discipline referrals and greater achievement, with the end result being a better school environment,” Dr. Siebe says.



Jennifer Strauser visits with a group of Eureka students during lunch. The associate principal's strong connection with African-American students led her to form an Equity Team for which 30 teachers have volunteered. Its subcommittees focus on relationships, culture and achievement and put strategies in place to help African-American students be more successful. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

## Eureka High Administrator Leads Efforts to Better Meet Needs of African-American Students

by Peggy Magee

One passionate person, taking baby steps, can transform the culture of the school. Jennifer Strauser, the interim associate principal at Rockwood's Eureka High School is proof of that.

Strauser's vision to step up efforts to help African-American students be more successful has been powered by the Eureka staff, she points out. "All it took was for our staff to learn more about the needs of these students, which they did from the kids themselves, and they rolled up their sleeves and got down to work," explains the former freshman principal at Eureka whose can-do attitude is infectious.

The catalyst for getting the staff pumped up was a project – consisting of a series of videos and a panel discussion that Strauser spearheaded last spring – with input from then principal Jim Wipke. Dr. Wipke had asked Strauser to incorporate the theme of diversity into the regularly-scheduled staff development sessions.

**The videos** feature 10 African-American students from Eureka talking openly and honestly about their home lives, their school experiences and what they need to be successful at Eureka. Individually, they responded to a set of specific questions that focused on achievement, relationships and school

climate. The faculty participated in reflection activities after the video viewings. The panel discussion allowed teachers to pose their own questions to these same students.

**The project** was guided with insight and suggestions from Rockwood's coordinator of educational equity and diversity, Terry Harris, a former Rockwood VICC student himself. About Harris, Strauser notes, "He has been my consultant and confidant since day one."

The first-hand accounts "sparked a fire in the faculty," she reports. "It was then that I realized we were ready for an Equity Team." Her previous attendance at a district-sponsored Equity Training retreat had enlightened her on issues and approaches. After the retreat, she says, "I became passionate about my calling to make a difference in the lives of our African-American students."

She first realized that calling in her role as VICC liaison for Eureka, part of her duties as freshman principal that she continues to perform under her new umbrella of responsibilities – diversity, professional development

and student interventions. She saw how much the students valued and benefited from her mentorship, advocacy efforts and the little things she did for them, day in and day out.

Knowing how important it is for them to feel part of the school community, she planned events to help facilitate their involvement. Many ninth graders were eager to attend the first home football game of the freshman Wildcats knowing they would be provided dinner and transportation home. A similar “tailgate” activity was hosted for all VICC students before the annual varsity homecoming game. “It gave them an avenue for participation,” she explains, adding, “The key to their success is the relationship they have with their school.”

Because of her approachability and welcoming personality, students are drawn to Strauser and motivated by her “no nonsense” style, encased in encouraging words that reveal her unwavering confidence in their potential. And should her students let her down, she stays true to her convictions of having “total acceptance and unconditional positive regard” for them.

**It’s that quality** of Strauser’s that helped Tia Paulette right herself after a rough start at Eureka. “Ms. Strauser helped me restore my hope,” notes the former VICC student who, in her sophomore year, was suspended for 49 days. Now focused on pre-law coursework at Mizzou, Tia credits Strauser with believing in her, “no matter what,” and fueling her desire to achieve, which resulted in numerous scholarships and awards.

Strauser, a petite blonde from the small, rural town of Sullivan, MO where she still lives, finds it rather ironic that she, of all

people, has assumed this leadership role on behalf of African-American students. From the age of nine until when she was hired by Rockwood several years ago, she says, “I had no contact with blacks at all. In fact, there is not a black person within miles of where I live.”

Nevertheless, inspired by what’s in her heart, she goes above and beyond, this year forming an Equity Team with nearly 30 teachers volunteering to be part of it. And the committee has already made significant strides.

**The homecoming tailgate** was again planned, but this year it was organized by several teachers on the team and it was bigger and better than before, with nearly 40 students and a dozen faculty present. “Building relationships was our goal,” notes Spanish teacher Emily Hause, who serves on the subcommittee on relationships, “and so we planned lots of fun, interactive activities, some that the faculty joined in on.” When relationships are formed, students become motivated to participate and achieve, she explains. “It makes for a safe environment to take risks in learning and to try new things.” The tailgate also included pizza, a reduced price football ticket and transportation home.

The subcommittee on culture has discussed the importance of having more diversity among the faculty, according to Spanish teacher Jenni Highfill. “One strategy we are trying to develop is having more student teachers of color,” she reports, adding that Jennifer Strauser has made contact with all of the local universities to try to make that happen.

A goal of the subcommittee on achieve-

ment centers on increasing the number of African-Americans in advance placement and honors classes, according to social studies teacher Paul Stanley. A research project he conducted revealed that many African-American students are not properly informed about the benefits of taking AP/honors classes.

To remedy that, the committee identified potential candidates and encouraged them to attend an open house where they made connections with teachers of AP/honors courses and other African-American students who already take them. “We invited 20 students and 18 showed up,” he reports, adding that hopefully at least several of them will enroll in upper level course work. “Our next steps will be to create support systems because for most, it will be their first time in an AP or honors class.”

**This committee** would like to meet with the feeder middle schools to map out a collaborative strategy to identify more African-American students for challenge classes and give them a heads-up on high school opportunities.

While Strauser understands the complexities of issues related to African-American achievement, she is determined to do what she can to improve the situation. If, for example, the parent involvement piece is lacking, she insists, “We cannot sit on our hands.” She believes it is the responsibility of educators to meet the needs of all students. “We are raising awareness about issues facing our African-American students and, little by little, we hope to make changes and impact lives.”

it. Hoping to someday operate a sustainable farm, she says the class “opened my eyes to all the ways I can make farming energy efficient.” Art is also an interest of Shelbey’s and in her minor, “You’ve Been Framed! Self Portraits Throughout History,” she analyzed herself through drawing, starting with the past and looking toward the future.

Shelbey credits Metro guidance counselor Dr. Dorothy Mang with being the force behind her participation in the Scholars Academy. After seeing Shelbey’s results on the IQ test that all potential candidates are required to take, Mang talked to her and encouraged her to apply. “She moved me from being on the fence to actually making application.”

Mang says she did for Shelbey what she does for all students, using her persistence to get them through the extensive application process, of which two essays are required. She is a big fan of the Scholars Academy and wants as many of her students as possible to benefit from it. “As an opportunity for gifted students, it is probably the most enriching experience a student will have during high school. Those who participate form a unique population: one that is ripe with diversity, enthusiasm and intellect.”

As a counselor, Mang gets high marks from all these students. When AJ described her as “the most amazing counselor I’ve ever had,” the other four teens nodded their heads in agreement. They are all sold on Metro, period, which ranked 23rd in

the nation in Newsweek Magazine’s report on America’s Best High Schools, making it the second highest ranking school in Missouri. Hands down, the students are happy they chose the Central West End school over their home district school.

Jolie, a resident of Affton, likes that Metro is “challenging” and that she has to work hard. She is particularly impressed with her English classes, “which have made me a better writer.” All the students agree that Metro’s rigorous curriculum is among its pluses. “Many of the teachers are skilled in knowing how to stretch us academically,” notes AJ, of Chesterfield.

Being surrounded by other bright students is another appealing factor for them. “It’s great because everyone at Metro is smart and talented in many areas,” notes Andrew, of Webster Groves. Kislay, who resides in South St. Louis county, adds, “It’s a comfortable environment for us here.”

The teens agree that a common misperception about gifted students is that they are book worms who don’t get involved in much else besides reading and studying. Shelbey, of Breckenridge Hills, explains that Metro students are a fun, diverse bunch with varied talents. “Here at Metro we break the stereotype of being nerds.” She summarizes a Metro education as being “the best preparation for college.”



Twenty students from Metro High, including five voluntary transfer students who are pictured here, participated in last summer's Missouri Scholars Academy, a three-week program for gifted students from Missouri, held on the Mizzou campus. The VICC students rave about the experience and feel happy, too, that their city magnet school has proven to be a good fit for them. From left are: AJ Kokate, Jolie Huynh, Shelby Parnell, Kislav Bishnupuri and Andrew Riggs. Photo by Missouri Scholars Academy

## Scholars Academy Scores High with County Teens who attend Metro High

*Much about their City Magnet School Appeals to Them*

by Peggy Magee

The five voluntary transfer students at St. Louis' Metro Academic and Classical High School selected to attend last summer's Missouri Scholars Academy overwhelmingly rave about the opportunity. They are among the 20 students from the St. Louis magnet school who attended the residential program for academically gifted students, held on the Mizzou campus for the last 27 years.

The three-week Academy provides stimulation for some 300 incoming juniors from throughout the state and helps them better understand their special abilities. The "scholars," as they are called, pre-select an academic major and minor to study daily for the full duration, plus each takes "Personal and Social Dynamics," a class where soul-searching group discussions foster interpersonal growth and understanding. Guest speakers, performances, career education, along with extracurricular and social activities, round out the curriculum.

What impressed the five Metro transfer students the most is the exciting way the classes were taught. Hang "Jolie" Huynh, whose major was "It's pHun. It's Gas. It's Chemistry," talks about the "cool and interesting" experiments she did, much more elaborate than her high school labs. In her math minor, "Mathematical Mazes for the Mind," the lessons were not at all what she was accustomed to, forcing her to "think outside the box," she says.

Kislav Bishnupuri, also a chemistry major, agrees that the experiments were "really fun," adding, "They were a nice complement to what I learned last year in chemistry." He points out that his English minor, "Whodunit?," a class focused on crime fiction where scholars created and performed their own murder mystery, was especially enlightening, "because I'm a big fan of mystery novels and shows."

When Ajinkya (AJ) Kokate talks about his major, a biology class titled "Sperm and Oocytes and Embryos, Oh My!—Exploring the Mysteries of Mammalian Reproductive Physiology from Gametogenesis to Parturition," he concedes with a laugh, "It does sound weird," yet he found it to be "amazing." He explains, "We got to go to farms and work with animals to learn about their reproductive systems. It was a hands-on experience that helped me better understand the subject."

AJ shared the same forensic science minor with a fellow scholar from Metro, Andrew Riggs. Both thoroughly enjoyed "It's Elemental, My Dear Watson," where they took on roles as detectives charged with solving crimes using logical reasoning and chemical analysis. Riggs was equally pleased with the major he chose, "Introduction to Philosophy: Great Thoughts Worth Thinking" because it "expanded my knowledge of the learning process and provided a good foundation that will help me with other subjects."

"Designing Permanent Culture" was Shelby Parnell's class as an agriculture major and she was thrilled with

See Inside: **Scholars Academy Scores High**

### volunteer

*A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.*

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# Message from the CEO



**Teamwork!** The articles in this issue of the Volunteer reminded me of the importance of teamwork. In any endeavor, it really is true that all of us know so much more than any one of us. And while it is certainly true that principals, counselors, and teachers acting individually have the potential to make a huge difference in the lives of their students, that potential is multiplied when they work together as a team with their fellow staff members, the community and the student's family.

Vince Lombardi said, "Individual commitment to the group effort! That is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work." Whether the goal is to dramatically improve African-American student achievement as was initiated by Jennifer Strauser at Eureka High School, to implement student character education as occurred at Bayless Elementary, or to provide gifted students with unique and exciting academic activities as encouraged by counselor, Dr. Dorothy Mang, at St. Louis Metro High School, all of these efforts require everyone to work together to ensure success.

It should also be noted that, in addition to the school working effectively together, involving the community and home is also critically important. This is clearly highlighted in the character education article in which businesses in the community became involved to support and encourage outstanding character traits.

Parents were also key components through their example and through sharing the child's positive behavior at home with the school so that it could be supported and encouraged multiple times. The overused saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," really is true. It takes all of us working together as a team in a coordinated fashion, never giving up on any of the children, and remaining totally committed, for each and every child to experience success.

I trust you have been inspired by these examples of leadership and teamwork to take action today and join with them on our team goal of doing whatever is required to help all students succeed and realize their full potential.

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