

National
School of Character AWARD

Developing Great Human Beings

Before this South Carolina school opened its doors eight years ago, it first had to court a reluctant community. The school's story highlights the importance of including *all*—staff, parents, students—both in a vision of excellence and on the momentous journey to achieve it.

“Lake Carolina gives them everything they need to be great human beings,” says parent Joanne Guyton in describing the special qualities of this idyllic school located in scenic Blythewood. Guyton’s praise resonates in comments from other parents who indicate how Lake Carolina students show remarkable courtesy and empathy. Mark Curfman talks about how his third-grade son, Andrew, made it a point to congratulate a friend who had done better than he had in an activity, and another dad, Robb Dabbs, with a background in coaching Scouts, comments on the unusual sense of responsibility found in the student body: “It’s like a whole school of kids who are working to become Eagle Scouts.”

The irony is that when Lake Carolina opened eight years ago in response to rezoning caused by a population spurt, parents were reluctant to give up their old, familiar school for this new upstart. Forward-thinking Dr. James Ann Lynch, who was to be the principal of the new school, realized the importance of community buy-in and a shared vision. Starting in February 2002, she visited the elementary school from which the children and staff would come and listened to the concerns of staff and parents. From these informal conversations and other planned presentations emerged TEAM LCE, an acronym for together everyone achieves more in a loving and caring environment. That collaboration continues today, helping the school’s character education initiative to develop in a “logical, sequential, and progressive” order, with the staff, parents, and larger community having input during each stage of the journey.

DEVELOPING A SHARED VISION

“As a veteran principal, I knew that we would have to work together as a team to establish high expectations for learning and behavior,” says Lynch as she describes the staff’s exploratory stage to determine “exactly what kind of school we wanted to be.” After much research, the faculty, sharing input with the parents, decided on the Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) model, whose goal is “to grow responsible citizens through developing positive relationships between students and teachers, stimulating and awakening the brain through instructional strategies, and developing curriculum that makes learning come alive.” ITI, which is now known as the Highly Effective Teaching (HET) model, accents 19 Lifeskills, or qualities that develop good citizenship, and five Lifelong Guidelines, or guideposts for success in all phases of life. Teachers received extensive training on ways to integrate these concepts into professional practice, and newsletters and meetings kept parents informed about what was happening.

“Having a common language has enabled everybody to be on board, because we’re all talking about the same things,” says Counselor Jessica Skinner. Fourth-grade teacher Niki Jones agrees that “it makes understanding so much easier.” Students display unusual maturity in understanding that a common language aids communication. Roshini, a third grader, says, “It’s easy to clear up problems because of Lifeskills,” and fifth grader Brandon adds, “We all have the same words to follow. It just makes your life better.”

INFUSING LIFESKILLS
INTO SCHOOL LIFE

“We walk the talk here. Each child in this school is learning how to be a good person,” says Allison Capps, a long-term substitute teacher as well as a mother of a third grader in the school. A visitor to Lake Carolina can easily see how they “walk the talk here.” Granted, all the external trappings are present—Lifeskills are displayed on the outside marquee, posted on the walls, discussed on the morning TV show, and explained in the weekly letter to parents. What is more important, however, is that the Lifeskills are seamlessly integrated into schoolwide and classroom practices, find their way into class meetings, appear in classroom discussions, shape student behavior in and outside the classroom, and even play a role in student responses to disciplinary actions.

The comment of third grader Ryan, “We study the Lifeskills over and over so that it gets in our heads and we remember them,” may seem like an oversimplification, but it points to the degree to which the students and staff have internalized these values, making Lifeskills an accepted part of school culture. In fact, when ITI coaches visited the school last year, they commented, “The culture of mutual respect that has been established at Lake Carolina is unprecedented in our experience.”



Students are engaged in hands-on learning through inquiry lessons in science.

“We have used the data from our SIC [South Carolina School Improvement Council] surveys as well as input from our ITI coaches regarding the next steps. We have also surveyed teachers and staff. Our next step is threefold and includes enhancing our work with students on social/political action, engaging children as leaders for visiting educators, and creating student-developed immersion areas.”

—Dr. James Ann Lynch, *Former Principal*

Teachers report that the mutual respect that permeates staff relationships has had a positive effect on their instruction and provides for easy sharing of best practices at teacher-led faculty meetings. First-year teacher Anna Weatherford shares, “People went out of their way to help me be successful; this is a true community of friends helping friends.”

The life of learning at the Lake is never humdrum, as students participate in lively discussions that seek to make connections between different areas of experience. Each classroom is made of small learning clubs with desks set up in groups of four so that the team can solve problems together. New students are quickly assimilated because each new student has a “Navi-gator” (gators are the school mascot) who guides the newcomer in school procedures and expectations. Developing leadership is a priority: The school trains the entire fifth-grade class to be school leaders, through monthly meetings that feature community speakers and provide actual practice in leadership roles.

UNITING ALL THROUGH RITUALS AND SERVICE

School rituals, such as flying the Peace Flag, participating in the Literacy at the Lake program, and whole-school service projects, reinforce the life lessons. “The Peace Flag signifies the daily climate of the school, and the entire school community must work together to keep it flying,” says Skinner. The flag flies only when no significant disciplinary infractions occur, but those rare occasions when such a breach takes place become teachable moments. Another unifying and enjoyable practice is the Literacy at the Lake program in which the entire school community discusses a common book. Last year’s selection, *Do unto Others* by Laurie Keller,

provided a delightful romp into the importance of manners.

Service learning projects abound, connecting the entire school community—students, staff, and parents—in a common goal of doing good for others. In a moving letter to the principal, the Bedenbaugh family talks about how “proud and blessed” it feels to be part of the larger Lake Carolina family and expresses elation over the community’s phenomenal response to a fundraiser, especially during these dire economic times. The family concludes, “Instead of pulling away, our Lake Carolina family has pulled together and knocked our goals out of the ball park.”

Dr. Andrea Berry, who was formerly the school’s assistant principal and now serves as interim principal, points out that this colorful description might serve as an indicator of what Lake Carolina has done in the last eight years. At the outset, the staff had hoped that the disgruntled parents would become more accepting, that the students would thrive academically, and that a school culture based on respect, working together, and giving back to the community would evolve. Lake Carolina’s track record indicates success in all three areas, and this diverse, multicultural school has become an NSOC and a National Blue Ribbon School in the process. That, in the words of the Bedenbaughs, truly constitutes “knocking the goals out of the ball park.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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THE PROOF IS IN THE DATA

How we know character education is working at Lake Carolina Elementary School:

- The school received the National Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education in 2008 for being in the top 10 percent in academic achievement in South Carolina.
- The school has maintained a South Carolina school rating of Excellent since opening in 2002 and has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) every year.
- The school has been recognized by the South Carolina Department of Education for closing the achievement gap every year since 2003.
- Spring RIT (Rasch Unit) scores on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment have increased each year, with an average growth of 3.65 in reading and 5.35 in mathematics for grades 2 through 5 from 2006 to 2009.
- From the 2006–07 to the 2008–09 school year, the total number of disciplinary referrals has declined by 48 percent (from 339 to 176), with an even more significant decline, of 82 percent, in bus referrals (from 153 to 27).
- The school received the student attendance award for the district in 2002–03, 2003–04, and 2006–07 (the average student attendance rate over the past 6 years is 97.2 percent).
- Grade 5 parent and student surveys for the 2007–08 school year for the Annual School Report Card issued by the South Carolina Department of Education revealed the following:
 - ✓ Of the 113 parents responding, 93.6 percent were satisfied with the learning environment, and 94.5 percent were satisfied with school-home relations.
 - ✓ Of the 157 students responding, 96.2 percent were satisfied with the learning environment, and 97.4 percent were satisfied with school-home relations.
- For each of the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years, more than 260 parent/community volunteers were registered, with more than 6,000 volunteer hours of service recorded.