

## Westwood Elementary School

Grades PreK–3 ★ Enrollment 735 ★ Friendswood, Texas ★ Public/Suburban ★ Friendswood Independent School District

### Dynamically Shaping Hearts and Minds for the Future

The students in this friendly Texan school may be small in stature, but they are big in vision. Not only have they influenced the community of Friendswood to become crusaders for character, but they have also earned a reputation on Capitol Hill as a force for change.

**F**riendswood, Texas, a peaceful city just south of Houston, is a perfect match for Westwood Elementary School. The community fondly recalls that back in 1987 it was a group of its concerned citizens who urged the Friendswood Independent School District to try a character initiative. Little did they

know that this elementary school, whose oldest students are just in third grade, would become such a dynamic leader in the movement that it would inspire the community, the other district schools, and now the nation in its passionate commitment to caring for others.

Barbara Gruener, a certified Character

Counts trainer and a leader in Westwood's program since its inception, describes the extraordinary bond that has been created through projects that focus on caring: "It's like a wave. It has rippled out, and now it connects us to each other." The community has joined the little ones in countless humanitarian projects that run the gamut from knitting caps for newborn babies in developing countries to collecting diapers and baby supplies for a local pregnancy shelter. Parent Nancy Glaze, who has participated in many of these projects, says, "We have done several of these community-based drives with such great success that the residents of Friendswood seem to look at us as a service organization." Principal Lynn Hobratschk observes that the six Character Counts pillars—respect, responsibility, citizenship, caring, fairness, and trustworthiness—have become "the core belief system in this community."

Superintendent of Schools Trish Hanks also points out the extraordinary influence of Westwood on the intermediate (grades 4–6), junior high (7–8), and high school (9–12) levels in affecting student behavior and school culture. Hanks adds, "The high school students know the pillars, the Rotary and Chamber [of Commerce] know the pillars, and they extend into the community. [Disciplinary] referrals have declined, and academics have grown stronger, and it all started at Westwood."

#### LOOKING AT WAYS TO GO DEEPER

Keeping the character program "alive, fresh and appealing" remains a focus of the Character Crew, the school's character education team. Although character building has been an integral part of school life for two decades, Westwood, a three-time NSOC Finalist (in 2007, 2008, and



In a nurturing school environment, first graders give their mothers "Mommy Makeover" spa treatments for Mother's Day.

their winning year, 2009), is always alert to strategies that will enhance its program and consistently implements CEP's suggestions for growth. "We are constantly looking at ways to go deeper," says Laura Rachita, a music teacher and current chair of Character Crew.

The "rough" period that the school encountered from 1998 through 2003, a time of escalating discipline problems and declining standardized test scores, served as a catalyst for change. Following a retreat at the beginning of the 2003–04 school year, the faculty renewed its efforts to educate the whole child and to interweave character into all aspects of school life. Revitalizing the way the school practiced the Character Counts pillars was just the first step; recent years have also seen the introduction of two research-based programs that provide students with additional problem-solving tools: Capturing Kids' Hearts and Kelso's Choice. The faculty receives training in these programs, and the principal makes certain that all new hires are aware of Westwood's philosophy of "capturing kids' hearts before you work on their minds." Assistant principal Lee Whitlock recalls how the principal stressed "character education as the cornerstone of Westwood life" in his job interview five years ago, and says he is "amazed" at the ways in which the staff serves as "excellent role models for children, both in school and through service projects."

The results clearly show that Westwood's commitment to building character has reaped a fine harvest. Disciplinary referrals have dropped 65 percent from the 2003–04 level, and in each of the past eight years (since 2001–02), the school received an Exemplary rating from the Texas Education Agency, based on performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Students describe the Westwood climate in more personal terms: Second grader Skylar says, "If someone gets hurt, somebody else would help them up." Christian, another second grader, agrees: "We play, and we work

things out at the Kelso Board when there's a problem." Mary, a third grader, depicts her classmates: "They care about one another, and they don't bully each other. They follow the rules, and they listen to their teachers—and they respect everyone."

### VALUING WESTWOOD'S STUDENTS

The mission statement of the school sets forth its philosophical framework: *Westwood's students are valued and valuable. Guided by core character principles, they are well-mannered, respectful citizens who possess a strong academic foundation which fuels a continual passion for learning.* In addition to guidance lessons given by Gruener, students gain practice in living the pillars through diverse practices: curricular connections, morning meetings, employing common language, role playing, assuming leadership roles, and participating in a host of service-learning projects.



"Academic success is not a by-product of our character building; it is integral to the process," says Whitlock. Hobratschk, a proponent of inclusion, says that mainstreaming students with special needs has spurred academic improvement and social development. Monthly Round Table meetings provide help to teachers with struggling students, and cross-age Book Buddies aid in enriching reading skills and fine-tuning social skills. Westwood uses many resources to help students who are experiencing academic difficulties. For example, the Principal's Partners are adult volunteers who tutor students one-on-one, and the Peer Assistance and Leadership Program enlists the aid of Friendswood High School students, who build friendships and success through mentoring of Westwood children.

Students are enthusiastic about the Westwood approach to learning. Second grader Thomas says, "They [teachers] want your best work, and they want you to learn a lot, but they're really very kind." Bailey, a third-grade transfer student, reflects,

## The Proof Is in the Data

### How we know character education is working at Westwood Elementary School:

- ★ Westwood received an Exemplary rating from the Texas Education Agency, the highest recognition level for schools based on their performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS):
  - ✓ The percentage of students with Commended Performance scores in math grew from 33 percent in 2002 to 56 percent in 2009; 96 percent of third graders passed the 2009 TAKS math test.
  - ✓ The percentage of students with Commended Performance scores in reading grew from 46 percent in 2003 to 72 percent in 2009; for the sixth year in a row, 100 percent of students passed the TAKS reading test.
- ★ Attendance has improved, from 95.6 percent (2004) to 97.2 percent (2007), for which Westwood has achieved Gold Level recognition from the state of Texas.
- ★ Westwood received Gold Level recognition in reading and math achievement as well, thereby achieving gold performance in the only three areas for which K–3 elementary schools are eligible.
- ★ Disciplinary referrals dropped by 65 percent, from 417 referrals in 2003–04 to 145 in 2007–08, which is especially remarkable in view of the fact that Westwood serves as the district's elementary PASS program school to serve students who suffer from an emotional disturbance.
- ★ The community participates actively at Westwood. On average, volunteers clock a total of 46.9 hours per day assisting on campus.
- ★ Spring 2008 school climate surveys of staff, parents, and students indicate a high rate of satisfaction with the school, its safety, and its positive impact on students' lives.

"The teachers are really nice.... At my old school math was hard for me, but this year I learned multiplication because my teacher was so caring." It is easy to see why 99 percent of the students surveyed last year



Second graders conclude a book-writing unit by inviting their families in for a book signing.

agreed with the statement *The teachers here really care about me.*

### WESTWOOD STUDENTS VALUING OTHERS

“We do good deeds not for the rewards but to have a better life,” says third grader Julia in describing the school’s emphasis on developing a lifelong habit of giving back to the community. Students have visited nursing homes, knitted afghans for the needy, organized food drives, written letters to soldiers, performed at holiday concerts, and aided hurricane victims—and that’s only a partial list of the many caring projects in which these little ones have been involved. What is equally remarkable is that the parents and community have followed their lead and joined in the projects.

The students are well aware of the double benefit of giving: to both the giver and the recipient. Third grader Kylie muses: “Instead of just knitting for yourself, we have a Knitting Club where you knit for other people, and that makes me feel good inside. In choir, we sing together as a group and learn responsibility, and we sang for the

elderly people, which probably made them feel good inside.”

The unusual bond between school and community emerged last year when third graders in Deanna Ellisor’s class decided to create a book about their school through the In Our Global Village service-learning project, a collaborative international exchange between schools. As the students brainstormed items they wanted to include, they realized they could not tell the Westwood story without including its special relationship to the Friendswood community, so the young authors showcased that special connection in the presentation.

### DYNAMICALLY SHAPING HEARTS AND MINDS FOR THE FUTURE

Westwood’s big heart has garnered national attention, and the school received an invitation to the White House for its service to others. In 2007, the school’s third-grade knitters were honored because, in partnership with Save the Children, they had rallied the community to knit over 300 caps for newborns in developing countries. The children received praise for working so hard to help “babies they will never meet.” In 2009, Capitol Hill lauded their efforts as well, but this time, in addition to sending 650 caps, the Westwood honorees also became advocates, requesting an increased budgetary allotment for newborn health.

By molding the little ones to be tolerant, caring citizens with an ingrained commitment to society, Westwood is

making an investment in our nation’s future. A visitor to this friendly Texan school last December would have seen very tangible proof of the success of its mission: High-minded students in Carolyn Poole’s second-grade class had voted to forego their holiday party in order to stuff Christmas stockings for the needy. Their demonstration of selfless caring is proof that Westwood’s vision, *Dynamically Shaping Hearts and Minds for the Future*, is not just a catchy slogan. Moreover, as principal Hobratschk points out, it is “the best description of the school.” ★

### REFERENCES

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*Kelso’s Choice Conflict Management for Children*. Winchester, OR: Kelso’s Choice. Web site: [www.kelsochoice.net](http://www.kelsochoice.net).

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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## THE PRINCIPAL’S CORNER:

### Lynn Hobratschk

**WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION:** *First, develop a committee of “believers” who will help drive the initiative and become the first-step explorers, able to then testify to the value of making positive changes that will benefit the students and campus alike. Name the core values and create a unified theme and mission. Next, ensure training for all staff, and provide the necessary resources to be successful. Remember that it takes time to build a program. Hire purposefully. Heap encouragement on those who are stepping out, and establish expectations for all. Celebrate success!*