

Westwood Elementary School

Grades PreK-3 • Public/Suburban • Friendswood, Texas • Friendswood Independent School District

Touching a Whole Community

Although the oldest student at Westwood Elementary School is just in third grade, the little ones have an amazing influence on the grown-ups of Friendswood, Texas, an affluent suburb just south of Houston. In fact, Westwood third-grade knitters, in partnership with Save the Children, rallied the community to knit and crochet over 300 caps for newborns in developing countries. Honored at the White House for their efforts, a representative Westwood group aimed to spread the word that “something as little as a cap could help reduce the infant mortality rate.”

Spreading the message of good character is indicative of the *Westwood Spirit*, the school’s rallying slogan. Parents, citizens, and community leaders readily praise this Texas State School of Character (2007, 2008) for its caring ways and contributions to the community. “This school touches the whole community,” says parent Venette Westhoven. Mayor David Smith agrees: “The program at Westwood affects not only the kids. It affects the



entire community. It has been a re-education for adults. It teaches us how to set the proper standards on how we should be models of the core values.”

Westwood’s journey began in 1987, when a group of citizens urged the Friendswood Independent School District to begin a character education initiative. The Westwood commitment to character building has blossomed, enhanced by embracing strategies from other programs. In 2001 it adopted the Character Counts six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. The last few years have seen a movement to increasing student autonomy and providing them with the tools to handle conflicts successfully. Kelso’s Choice, an empowering problem-solving system for students based on a cute frog named Kelso, and Capturing Kids’ Hearts, a self-management classroom discipline model, have helped Westwood create a school climate that stresses responsibility for self and dedication to helping others.

The six pillars are visible everywhere: on bulletin boards, classroom posters, and the school’s Web site, as well as in the student handbook, parent newsletters, and counselors’ brochures. However, student behavior serves as the best proof that the pillars are truly ingrained. Disciplinary referrals have decreased 62 percent in the last four years. Elaina, a third-grade

student, says that what she remembers most about her first year at the school was learning about the values. Another third grader, Chanse, says that the pillars mean more as a student progresses through the other grades, and he shares how good he felt when he bought a book for his first-grade Book Buddy with his own money as a reward for progress.

Legend has it that, when Quakers founded Friendswood over 110 years ago, they referred to it as the “Promised Land.” To the present townspeople, Westwood could be dubbed the “Promised School,” because it embodies such a spirit of acceptance, caring, and academic excellence. State of Texas Representative Larry Taylor, a Westwood alumnus who was recently recognized by the district’s Education Foundation as a model of citizenship, points out, “It is the expectation of the community that the goal of the school should be to help raise good citizens.” He praises Westwood for its double accomplishment: “The students excel in academics and at the same time promote character.”

REFERENCES

Capturing Kids’ Hearts. College Station, TX: The Flippen Group. Web site: www.capturingkidshearts.com/education/ckh.html.

CHARACTER COUNTS! Los Angeles, CA: Josephson Institute of Ethics. Web site: www.charactercounts.org.

Kelso’s Choice Conflict Management for Children. Winchester, OR: Kelso’s Choice. Web site: www.kelsoschoice.net.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

Find a key lead person, as we did in Barbara Gruener, who can coordinate and encourage your initiative. She had the training and the drive to keep our character education practices current and focused. Next, a team of character leaders—teachers, parents, and community members—is important to create the “us.” After that, it is important that the school leadership team embrace the character education concept and follow through with dollars, training, and keeping the Eleven Principles at the top of its priorities.