

2008 Impact Award Finalist

Challenge Charter School: Kids first in a 'new frontier'

BY LAURA NEWPOFF
Contributing Writer

There are nearly 4,000 charter schools across the U.S. But only 53 of them were honored last year as National Charter School of the Year.

Challenge Charter School of Glendale was one of the elite few. The honor, given by the Center for Education Reform, a policy group based in Washington, D.C., evaluated the schools based on four themes: achievement, planning and execution, satisfaction, and policies and programs.

Challenge, which serves 600-plus K-6 students, also was named a "Blue Ribbon" school in 2007 by the U.S. Government's Blue Ribbon Schools Program. The honor, known

as the most prestigious presented by the U.S. Department of Education, is based on a school's self evaluation that allows participation from teachers, students, parents and community representatives to assess strengths and weaknesses.

Challenge was founded by Greg and Pam Miller. Greg said it was the biggest step in both of their professional careers. They launched it with an equity line of credit and adopted the Core Knowledge Sequence as the school's curriculum and started with about 100 students.

At the time they got the school going, Greg said they had a combined 20 years of school volunteerism experience and Pam had been elected for two terms to the Paradise Valley Unified School District Governing Board. Their passion for putting kids first in educational decision making provided the drive to start the venture, he said.

It wasn't easy. There were financial and political challenges, facility needs and institutional opposition to what he called a "new frontier of education reform."

"We invested everything we had emotionally, physically and financially," Greg said. "Failure was not an option."

In building their dream, the Millers imple-



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Greg and Pam Miller's school serves 600-plus K-6 students and received a "Blue Ribbon" award in 2007.

mented new ideas such as "participative management" with the faculty and built an environmentally friendly school with air purification systems in every classroom, safe building materials and an anti-asthma/allergy landscape pallet. They also adopted rich curriculum rather than just a process approach to learning, Greg said. And teachers were given the ability to express their creativity in classroom instruction.

The duo's work has paid off. The Millers were selected as one of only 17 original "Circle of Honor Principals" in 2006, representing the top 1 percent of the state's

principals. Also in 2006, Greg Miller was recognized as one of 13 "National Education Leaders That Perform" by the Center of Education Reform.

As active as the Millers have been with their school, there's still plenty of time to stay active with community service. The school supports local National Guard families, the Westside Food Bank, the Westside Crisis Center and raised more than \$4,000 for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

The school also created a Kids Care Club, allowing students to take on projects that support the local community.

CHALLENGE CHARTER SCHOOL

TOP EXECUTIVES: Greg and Pam Miller, Founders

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EMPLOYEES: 54

FOUNDED: 1996