

Aventura City of Excellence School (ACES)

Grades K-8 • Public Charter/Suburban • Aventura, Florida • Miami-Dade County Public Schools

Practicing Living Values

Excellence is the expectation, not the exception is a familiar slogan to the students of Aventura City of Excellence School (ACES), a public charter school located in the planned city of Aventura, Florida, just north of Miami. The beautiful, contemporary campus, with a magnificent view of the Intracoastal Waterway and Biscayne Bay, is a tribute to the vision of the city of Aventura, which operates the school in conjunction with Charter Schools USA. City manager Eric Soroka states, "We wanted our school to be different. One way was to involve character from the beginning."

Principal Julie Alm, who was the leader of ACES even before it opened in



August 2003, attributes the school's strong academic performance (it consistently surpasses schools with similar demographics) to its enriching curriculum and emphasis on the whole child. The ACES character education initiative focuses on the 12 core values of the Living Values program, based on the United Nations Preamble to the Children's Bill of Rights. Alm says, "Living Values has provided a framework and springboard from which to expand."

Vice principal Daniel Sandberg adds, "It's how we live and breathe every day." Alm points out how shared leadership has given vitality to the program, since "energy comes from everyone."

Students at ACES are committed to their school and to "Living their Values." Second grader Maria says, "The best thing about ACES is the teachers. They teach you how to be a great student when you grow up." Fourth grader Maritza adds, "Values change the world." She explains how her experience as a Kinder Buddy who read to a kindergartner showed responsibility and cooperation: "I felt like a big sister to her because I taught her values." The Peace Book, a volume that includes the best writing of ACES students as they describe their own feelings about peace and their possible contributions to a

peaceful future, reveals the perceptions of sensitive students aware of their responsibility to make the world a better place.

Integrating values into the curriculum invigorates study both inside and outside the classroom. For example, science teacher Janice Lendick shows how students design and plant a school garden as part of the eco-literacy science curricu-

lum. Several fourth-grade students, guided by special projects coordinator Leslie Loewenthal, are at the helm of the daily broadcast that highlights character events and awards. Seventh-grade civics teacher James Ostrick instructs his students in the Bill of Rights, what it means to be a citizen, and how ethical values shaped our legal system. He says, "I teach students about their role in society, and their responsibility as an adult."



THE PRINCIPAL'S CORNER:

Julie Alm

ADVICE TO THOSE NEW TO CHARACTER EDUCATION:

Set reasonable goals and expectations through a purposeful implementation. Character education has the greatest impact when it is infused throughout the school. To have a true impact, character education cannot be parachuted in with the "latest and greatest off-the-shelf program." A school culture that is character-education centered grows and develops.

Parental involvement is also key to the school's success. Parents do not seem to mind the requirement that they must volunteer 20 hours per year (30 hours if they have two or more children at ACES). Parent Larisa Goldberg says, "It's a family kind of environment, so you want to help." School Advisory Board president Julie Shapiro comments, "People want to be in this school. It's nice to come to school and have values reinforced." Robert Sherman, director of community services for the city of Aventura, notes that the nearby community center has also adopted "Values" into its after-school programs. With obvious pride and ownership, Sherman adds, "We do it because we care."

REFERENCE

Living Values Education Program. Haines Falls, NY: LVER, Inc. Web site: www.livingvalueseducation.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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