

FIRST SPRING RISING

By spring, we were aware that we had many families indicating they wanted to return to WEDJ the following year. With over 700 new applications, this was a huge improvement from the 57% return rate we inherited the year before. I wanted to reassure families and inform them of how WEDJ was distinct from other schools. It was not the individual initiatives, but the accumulation of so many enriching experiences in one place, that we felt made WEDJ a rare option:

- A critical mass of dedicated and committed staff
- Arts programming taught by passionate and talented artists
- Student artists perform in the community
- Suzuki violin for all students in K to grade 2
- PAL Program (Promoting Arts and Leadership) – character, leadership and health education curriculum during homeroom time
- Monthly phone calls home from PAL teacher
- A curriculum dedicated to small group learning (Peer teachers, Research & Technology, and intervention classes)
- A report card that is specific about what students know and need to learn
- Enrichment for all students at the Grades 6 to 8 level (Research & Technology)
- Wonder Workshops for the love of science (PK to grade 2)
- Promethian (digital white boards) Boards in every PK and K class
- All students learn chess in grades 4 through 8
- All students in grades 6,7 and 8 write a novel over three years
- National Double-Dutch Champions
- Cheerleading for all ages
- Administrators who teach

In the late spring, I also asked each member of the leadership team to write a bundle. I was pleased that my lead team was willing to take part in this experience. For instance, Ms. Cordova shared the following significant insight:

...When we take on leadership roles, it is tricky because so much of what we do depends on the actions/responses of others, but when something doesn't happen as planned, then I need to figure out a better way to support the change that may be needed... We have signed on to grow a school in a great direction, and I am passionate about that goal...I know there have been times this school year where at least one or all of us have said or thought, "I can do it by myself, I don't need any help." Somewhere the wiring got all mixed up and

we have been under the misguided notion that we don't need help; we can do it all by ourselves. Our mission statement speaks to community. There are no individuals in a community...instead of playing the blame game, why don't we just go to work and solve the problem?"...We all know there are small fires in and around WEDJ. Let's not only rely on the administration to extinguish them. We can start by simply not indulging in finger pointing....To sum it all up, this bundle is suggesting that you don't sweat the small stuff because you can't control every aspect of your daily life. Having viable relationships with others allows for you to lean on them in your time of need. (Warm regards, 06/02/13 (Ms. Cordova, Dean of Special Education))

Ms. Bradshaw prepared a wonderful PowerPoint featuring each staff member and Ms. Nugent emphasized hard work in her humorous message about being a teacher:

As we come to a close of the school year, let's reflect on the hard work that was done through this long and hard journey...

How do I know I am a teacher?

- 1. You hear 25 voices behind you and you know exactly which one belongs to the child out of line.*
- 2. You walk into a store and hear the words Mr./Mrs. and know that you have been spotted.*
- 3. You have twenty-five people accidentally calling you mom or dad at one time or another.*
- 4. You can eat a multi-course meal in less than twenty minutes.*
- 5. You have trained yourself to go to the bathroom at two distinct times of the day: lunch and planning period.*
- 6. You want to slap the next person who says "Must be nice to work 8 to 4 and have the summers off"*
- 7. You feel the urge to talk to strange children and correct their behavior when you are out in public.*
- 8. You spend more money on school stuff than you do on your own needs.*
- 9. You are secretly addicted to hand sanitizer...*

*The purpose of life is not to win. The purpose of life is to grow and share. When you come to look back on all that you have done in your life, you will get more satisfaction from the pleasure you have brought into other people's lives...
– Rabbi Harold Kushner (Ms. Nugent, Dean of Teacher Development, 6/17/13)*

Mr. Carter spoke about teamwork and "Things that make you go "WOW":

Effective teamwork in schools has a domino effect. If there is good teamwork among the administrators, then there will be good teamwork between the staff, which then affects the school climate positively in terms of teamwork. Teams have increased morale when everyone is friendly and have an

encouraging influence on others. It is also possible that students who work in teams to encourage each other are likely to experience higher success in their academics...This school year we have been working on developing a positive school climate through a whole school approach that supports student achievement and well-being. A positive school climate is the key to promoting student achievement...It is also a crucial component of bullying prevention. Ladies and Gentlemen the WEDJ staff is promoting a positive climate. Mr. Carter's Evidence:

- *Less referrals*
- *Transition is getting better during dismissals*
- *Teachers are on post and making themselves visible to maintain safety*
- *Less parental complaints*
- *Parents attending focus meetings on Saturday and After-School*
- *The building looks great with all of the Art-work (thanks staff)*
- *8th Graders are excited about upcoming events*
- *Enrollment is up*
- *The facilities is looking good, thanks to the cleaning*
- *Teachers have a smile on their faces daily.*

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO WOW!!!!

- *Shakespeare performance was excellent*
- *Parent participation at the focus group*
- *The Wiz was awesome*
- *Office staff working on enrollment*
- *Facility Team working hard*
- *Double Dutch Team heading to California*
- *My trip to Chicago-town*
- *Staff Appreciation pictures*
- *Student election*
- *Pep Rally excellent (Mr. Carter, VP, School Culture)*

We were committed to finishing the year on a strong note. After the DC-CAS test, we engaged in an abundance of activity. We hosted the first WEDJ Chess Championship at the end of May. Spring was also a time for field trips. The PK Nation went to the fire station and Mr. Sessoms took our middle students on several cultural tours of DC including a stop at the Cheesecake Factory. Ms. Palmer had also arranged for a local animal farm to bring over a petting zoo, so our little ones who were studying animal babies could learn more about spring babies of the farmyard kind!

We also had each seventh-grade student write a speech to run for our first Student Council President for the following school year. The authentic task of a real election was quite appealing for an English class activity. Students had to create an outline of their speech, a draft, and then make revisions to their draft, before presenting

it to their classmates, who voted on the top three candidates. The writing (and reading of their own writing), plus speaking, made for a powerful language learning experience. The finalists then presented their speeches to the grades 3 to 8 students at an assembly before students voted in <Student A> to fill this key role.

At the final parent-teacher conferences, Ms. Almonte arranged to have all the Grades 3–8 students exhibit their projects for the Science and Inquiry Fair that day as well. We had hoped that more families could have viewed the tremendous work of the students. Before long, we had moved on to the Grade 8 graduation ceremony, the Kindergarten ‘Moving Up Celebration’, and the Student Awards Assembly. Ms. Huddleston played a key role in organizing the kindergarten program, and Ms. Robinson was instrumental in leading the school awards assembly. The grade 8 graduation ceremony was a memorable event. The students were dressed up and most parents came to see their kids receive their WEDJ graduation diploma. Ms. Moore, Mr. Sessoms and Mr. Carter delivered some of the most genuine and emotional speeches I have ever heard. It was touching to see how much the community cared for one another. I knew the kids would return to WEDJ in the future, because we did make a difference in their lives.

In our final newsletter, distributed on June 20, 2013, we shared the winners of the first John Goldman Award and announced the new ‘dorms’ format for collecting points towards the Wolf Cup – the ‘house’ spirit award. Our parent winner was Ms. Kamilah Wheeler, our staff winner, Mr. Carter and our new student council president was voted in as the student winner.

I also shared details in the newsletter about our new school and family ‘dorms.’ Every student, parent and staff member in the school was inducted in a college ‘dorm’, so groups would compete each year for the new prized ‘Wolf Cup’, awarded to the team with the highest extra-curricular participation points total for the year. Parents, who joined school activities, would collect points for their PTA Loyalty Cards, as well as score points for your dorm! Students, who wore ‘dorm’ colors on the final day of school, were awarded extra points for the Cheer off! According to the on-line newsletter:

In an effort to build a spirit of teamwork among students and emphasize a college-going culture, WEDJ has created several ‘dorms’ this year at school. Each dorm is named after a local college or university, and led by a WEDJ faculty member. Students have already participated in dorm-based activities, such as field day during the first week of school. We will use dorms throughout the year and invite family participation in many dorm activities. Our dorms include

- *American University*
- *Bowie State University*
- *George Mason University*
- *Howard University*
- *Johns Hopkins University*

- *Morgan State University*
- *Old Dominion University*
- *Randolph-Macon College*
- *St. Mary's College*
- *The George Washington University*
- *The University of the District of Columbia*
- *Towson University*
- *University of Maryland*
- *University of Virginia*
- *Virginia Polytechnic University*

Make sure you know what dorm your students is in and find out what the dorm colors are so students can dress with team spirit when dorm activities call for it. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/college/dorm-life-for-wedj-students-brings-future-college-possibilities-into-focus>)

My final message to staff before Camp Imagination (summer school) took center stage reflected on what I had learned as well as the many things I was thankful for at WEDJ. I encouraged staff to think about the glass as half full, to use words that help, be thankful, be forgiving and continue to be joyful.

Looking back on this time, I was very pleased that our roster for the start of the following year was complete and that we were well on our way to increasing the critical mass of exceptional teachers for our students. I went back to Canada leaving summer school in the hands of co-principals, Carter and Bradshaw. While my immigration status had yet to be confirmed, I was eager to begin year 2. No question, I loved being at WEDJ.