

THE FIRST REACH – WEDJ PARENTS

In my initial interview with Goldman, I was asked, “*What do you think will be the biggest challenge if you were selected to be the principal at the William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts?*” I immediately thought about my two summers of course work at the University of Toronto, where I received my principal credentials. One presenter told us to look around the room and describe the demographics of the people sitting in the lecture hall. We were seated in a sea of seasoned Caucasian females. We were informed that we were a minority in Toronto, a city weighing in at well over 2 million people. How could we possibly represent all the children in this mixed urban community? I knew that my time as a leader in a DC urban school would be temporary, however, as long as my Visa would let me make a contribution, I would do my best in the time I had. I told Goldman that my biggest challenge would be that I was not from the community. While this is something I could not control, it nevertheless did not deter me from wanting to influence positive change, but in doing so, mentor future school leaders.

I remember writing and re-writing my first parent communication; I wanted to reach out and meet everyone. With three parent orientations scheduled for so many new students joining us, this would be a great place to begin.

Dear WEDJ community members,

I am delighted to join the WEDJ community. As a former trumpet player, dancer and gymnast, I understand what it's like to work hard, make sacrifices and be committed to excellence. I have been fortunate to work with educators worldwide, but I have to say in the past two weeks, I have met some of the most passionate educators on the continent. I have no doubt you will feel the energy of this impressive talent pool. As we approach the 2012–2013 school year, there are some things you can do to pave the road for school success...I hope you will find something to respond to so we can begin our conversations and build strong relationships! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/performing-arts/august-message-from-the-principal>)

I also informed families about the new arts programming as well as the new PAL (Promoting Arts and Leadership) homeroom class. The PAL course focused on a different character focus each year: caring, sharing, honesty, friendship, manners, being good citizens, sports and team players). Students also learned study and life skills, such as being thorough and precise on tests, how to achieve top grades on assignments and how being healthy can contribute to learning. Without character

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and health, an artist's reach is limited. We wanted WEDJ artists to be amazing role models – so we planned to teach about the whole child and how to be successful in college and life. Every student had their own PAL booklet to read and do activities in school and at home.

The orientations were well attended. On average, we had over 50 people at each one. We were eager to communicate how we were distinct from other schools, so families new to WEDJ, would be assured that the school they registered for, was right for them. I was informed that some families shopped around at the beginning of the year before the official 'count day' to see which charter would be the best fit for their child. We were well aware when planning that if we didn't make a good first impression, we might need to reorganize, and this usually would mean downsizing staff. While I was confident with the energy and the talent of the staff, I needed to get to know my families to make sure they would be pleased with our new plans for the school. We started off on the first day of school with 325 students registered, and by the October 5th Count Day, we had 422 students in attendance. We were pleased that word had spread about the school and that the message attracted more families.

We also burned the midnight oil to complete the revision of the WEDJ School Handbook for families, teachers and students in a timely manner. I worked closely with the office staff and Mr. Carter to update the messages and prepare a resource that would not only be informative, but promote the uniqueness of the school. If creativity was a key focus, how could we enhance our handbook beyond a simple series of procedural memos? Having a common source of information was vitally important. It required an enormous amount of work to have this resource ready for electronic distribution. From a legal standpoint, the handbook was an important communication tool. Families needed to be informed, particularly of the discipline procedures. The school lawyer was paid a substantial fee to ensure that the former resource had been reviewed and legal terms were laid out to detail the specifics of the consequences related to suspensions and expulsions. The School Handbook was yet another opportunity to write a welcome communication on behalf of the school leadership team. I wrote the introductory letter for Mr. Manahan and I, to welcome families to WEDJ:

Dear families,

July 2012

We are truly honored to lead the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School and thank you in advance for your time and support. WEDJ PCS is a co-educational day school that provides a college-preparatory, standards-based curriculum in both academics and the performing arts. All students engage in a rigorous academic program that includes instruction from professional artists from the Kirov Ballet, the National Philharmonic, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company.

We want to emphasize that every minute at school matters for young people and we promise to make our school a safe, inspiring and secure environment. Our priorities for the next few months are twofold:

1. All students need to master specific basics in math and language and staff need to communicate progress on a monthly basis.

2. We also know that helping students learn the habits of scientists, artists, and technologists will improve their chances of thinking creatively. Creative student work will be featured on our web site, in our halls and in our newsletter.

Throughout the school year, we want students to know and be confident about what they know, and we also want students to learn how to become leaders in the arts. To this end we have established the PAL (Promoters of Arts and Leadership) course in each grade at the beginning of the day to focus attention on how leaders behave and make a difference in the lives of others. We take learning seriously but we cannot educate alone. We respect that parents are the first teachers in a child's life, and we are committed to this partnership. Be warned we will ask you to fill in surveys and take part in many school activities so you will continue to play a key role in your child's education. We believe in the school's mission:

“The William E. Doar Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts will foster a safe, creative, enjoyable and culturally sensitive learning environment for all students with the goal of providing a college preparatory curriculum in both academics and the performing arts to produce the next generation of leaders for America and the global society.”

We want our students to be taught by teachers who are recognized as leaders in and out of the school. Please feel free to visit, email or call. We can promise to serve your family well, but cannot promise that you will be left alone!

Proudly serving you and your family,

Dr. Barbara Smith, Principal & Mr. John Manahan, Chief Operating Officer
<http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WEDJ-Handbook-2012-13.pdf>