

## THE CHALLENGE TO REMAIN UNIQUE AT SOUTH CHARLOTTE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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In 2003-2004, South Charlotte Middle School was fortunate to be named the first School to Watch (STW) in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. Being a School to Watch carries with it a great responsibility, not only do we serve as a model for other schools to emulate, but we must always find ways to improve what we are already offering and continue to be unique. Although since initial recognition, the school program has changed and undergone refinement, certain key elements remain the cornerstone of the South Charlotte program.

students can achieve academic excellence. A hallmark of the South Charlotte Middle School program is the commitment to a program of academic rigor. Teachers plan as grade level and vertical curriculum teams to insure their lessons are challenging and non-repetitive. There is a shared expectation by teachers, parents, and students that the curriculum is stimulating and instructional groupings meet the needs of students with varying achievement levels. The focus in all classrooms is differentiation with the goal to have as few students as possible requiring remediation while simultaneously raising the level of all students.

The entire staff believes all



*Offered at all three grade levels, dance is an integral component of a thriving fine arts department at South Charlotte Middle School. Honors dance is a 9th block offering.*

The curriculum helps reinforce important concepts through interdisciplinary units of study. Literature is chosen to coincide with the periods and regions of history being discussed in social studies. With the school's emphasis on community service, teachers have developed interdisciplinary units of study crossing not only curriculum but also grade levels. Through a developed awareness of community and global needs, students are involved in a myriad of activities ranging from immediate community activities to assisting with the most recent Katrina disaster in 2005. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts, development of essential skills, and the ability to apply what one has learned to real world problems.

Another cornerstone of a School to Watch is an emphasis on social equity, which is tightly intertwined with academic excellence. South Charlotte offers a variety of opportunities for students to learn about their own and others' cultures. Guest speakers have talked about Judaism, World Religions, World War II experiences and life in Asian cultures. As part of the social studies curriculum students plan simulated events highlighting the culture they are studying. There is a continued effort by teachers to expose these students to real world problems existing beyond their community.

Each child's voice is heard and acknowledged through various opportunities. Many clubs are available for students to make a contribution to the school and the community such as Student Council, Beta Club, Leadership and a wealth of co-curricular activities.

The school's award winning yearbook is written and assembled by a supervising teacher with a staff of students who represent the many cultural backgrounds representative of our school population.

The school welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families through a wide variety of committees with our Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Our PTA actively seeks and encourages parents to come to school to help in our health room, library and office, to help tutor students, to engage in after school activities such as parties and rewards for End of Grade tests. Modeling an example of community involvement, the PTA has developed two *schoolmate* partnerships with schools lacking adequate financial resources.

The cornerstone for which South Charlotte Middle School (SCMS) has received most recognition, as a School to Watch, was the implementation of an enrichment period, called the ninth block. The school creates a personalized environment supporting each student in his or her intellectual, ethical, social and physical development. The SCMS scheduling team created a ninth block in response to a challenge by the community to provide students with a wider choice of learning opportunities reaching beyond the more traditional core and elective classes. The ninth block is a positive solution allowing young adolescents opportunities to expand their interests and learning experiences while maintaining the school's strong academic focus (Waggoner & Cline 2006).

When the ninth block courses were developed, many factors were considered, such as: school demographics, No Child Left Behind

regulations, and the North Carolina Accountability System. Initially, traditional classes such as drama, foreign language, physical education and business education were offered with a collection of creative courses designed to remediate and enrich all levels of students. Currently, the ninth block offering has evolved to meet the ever-changing demographics of the school community. This year, the schedule includes a course specifically designed for the growing English as a Second Language population. Another course, Thinking out Loud, is based on the high school International Baccalaureate course, Theory of Knowledge. In

addition, students have opportunities to participate in Shocking Players and Singers, Honors Arts, and Jazz Band.

With the inception of ninth block, the first leadership class began for eighth graders. After two successful years of developing student leaders, the program expanded into seventh grade. Under the leadership and guidance of an extremely creative teacher, the students invited political, educational and community celebrities to participate in a middle school version of *Inside the Actors Studio*; renaming it, *Inside the Leaders Studio*.



*South Charlotte Middle School Seventh Grade Leadership Class sponsored "Inside the Leaders Studio." Guests included: House Speaker Jim Black, CMS Superintendent Frances Haithcock, Radio Personality Sherry Lynch and Center City Partners Executive Moira Quinn.*

The fourth cornerstone, Organizational Structures and Processes sets the stage for implementing successful Schools to Watch middle school. There are many parental and

teacher opportunities for school involvement including: School Leadership Team (SLT), PTA, Music/Arts Council (MAC), and Booster Club. The PTA alone has over twenty-

five committees for parents and teachers to volunteer.

Although a North Carolina School of Excellence for eight years, school personnel constantly analyze current assessment data to promote increased student achievement. This may take the form of re-looping, allocation of resources, before and after school tutoring, specialized advisory activities, targeted specialized instruction during the newly created ninth period, and focused staff development.

Content rich professional development is afforded through district initiatives and South Charlotte Middle School's own ongoing in-service that occurs during team meetings, after-school, and on teacher workdays. The focus of staff development activities is not only to increase the number of students working on grade level, but also to raise the achievement level of high performing students. Teachers take an active role in selecting appropriate staff development activities.

Teachers, administrators, and *parents* make student achievement their primary goal. Teachers know that they are accountable for their students' scores. Each year, the principal reviews the previous year's EOG scores with the staff as a whole and with individual teachers. Through the parents' belief

and support of the academically rigorous school environment, the teachers are allowed to extend and challenge young adolescents to achieve their potential. At SCMS the shareholders have a belief, students only learn when the task is a little too difficult for them. This belief is achieved solely through the shared vision of the entire school community.

What have we learned in three years? It is an honor to be named a School to Watch and the distinction carries with it an obligation to continue to examine and refine the school program as it relates to the four components: academic excellence, social equity, responsiveness to students' needs and organizational structures. Each year, the school revisits the qualities that make it stand out as a School to Watch. Are we continuing to honor our STW status? Are we offering programs that continue to make us unique and other schools will visit and want to replicate? In an age of infinite choice, Harvard business school's Michael E. Porter believes, there's a better way to achieve competitive advantage: becoming unique (2006). Each year, the school community reviews what worked and did not work the previous year and evaluates what *will* make the coming year even better. Through this process, South Charlotte continues to offer unique opportunities for the students to achieve even higher.

### *References*

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