

MOVING OUR STUDENTS BEYOND THE STANDARD AT EAST WILKES MIDDLE SCHOOL

By

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By definition, the purpose of the Schools to Watch initiative identifies the very vision and mission of East Wilkes Middle School.

The faculty and staff at East Wilkes Middle School firmly believe that our responsibilities to our students extend far beyond the standard course of study and test scores. We view our school community as a family first. Our students look to us for guidance and support, stressing the importance of education in their future. We strive to teach each and every student to believe in his or her ability to succeed.

The vision for East Wilkes Middle School is to develop students who will complete the school year as confident, successful youth who are critical and independent thinkers. Our goal is always that our students will possess the knowledge and skills to exhibit high standards of conduct and enthusiasm for learning. At anytime throughout the school year, one can walk down the halls and see this vision being realized through positive education opportunities at East Wilkes Middle School.

East Wilkes Middle School is located in the beautiful foothills of Wilkes County. Currently, we have approximately 430 students. While we do not demonstrate a large population of ethnic diversity, our students do come from a wide-range of backgrounds, economic levels, and family structures. At present, we serve approximately 45 students with disabilities. The racial make-up is 92% Caucasian and 8% minority. Forty-Nine percent of our students qualify for the free and/or reduced lunch program.

East Wilkes Middle School students and staff pride themselves on the accomplishments demonstrated over the past six years. The student achievement and accomplishments of the school are noteworthy. Since opening in 2002, East Wilkes Middle School has been identified as a School of Distinction or School of Excellence every year, with the exception of the 2005-2006 school year. For the 2005-2006 school year, we were named a School of Progress, yet, met the requirements for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

Academic Excellence

To ensure academic excellence for all students, Wilkes County Schools requires teachers to be trained in several instructional initiatives. All teachers have been trained in Kagan Strategies. These strategies incorporate cooperative learning groups, ability grouping, brain breaks and class builders. In addition, all teachers have participated in professional development in Thinking Maps, Curriculum Differentiation, and Learning Focused Schools. At the school level, we participate in a “faculty read” staff development each year. The faculty had read *How Full is Your Bucket?* by Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton. In the school year of 2008-2009, we read *Fair Isn't Always Equal* by Rick Wormeli. Because of the commitment to professional development, teachers are supported with a toolbox of strategies for instruction. Independent and group projects, tiered assignments, dramatic performances and school-wide public speaking activities are just a few of the tools utilized on a weekly basis throughout the building.

In the classroom, one will observe various engaging activities. Inquiry based learning supports the curriculum in our science labs as students, for example, study DNA, bacteria growth or body systems. In 6th grade science, students participate in a Science Fair. The Scientific Method is taught in stages with winning student projects moving on to a county competition, regional and then a state level with qualifying projects. In addition, 6th grade students participate in Forestry Camp each year. Students travel to the W. Kerr Scott Dam where they study trees and the effects of pollution and natural events on the environment. Students conclude Forestry Camp with a competition between the four Wilkes County middle schools. East Middle has won several recognitions over the past six years.

Each grade level is required to develop integrated units throughout the school year. This is one area where our teachers shine with creativity. For example, the 6th grade developed a “Legends of the Fall” Unit. Students read urban legends and studied a map legend, Longitude and Latitude. They wrote a continuing local folklore story and as each group rotated through this station, they created their own “Perfect Community” on graph paper demonstrating ratio and scale drawings. Another team completed a Penguin Unit where students researched the geographic origins, wrote comparisons between two penguin movies and incorporated an art contest. The 8th grade celebrated the Easter/Spring season with an egg project. Students were required to develop a budget for taking care of their egg.

Students calculated and predicted the force and velocity of a falling egg with a culminating project designed around the “Egg Drop”. A major event at EWMS this year was our Earth Day Celebration. This event resulted from an integrated unit relating to the atmosphere, habitats and recycling.

The East Wilkes Middle School “Special Interest” Groups endeavor is a curriculum innovation developed by the EWMS staff. Faculty submitted proposals and year-long curriculum based on topics they were especially interested in teaching beyond the terms of the standard course of study. These topics furthermore were topics that would be researchable by students. Students were surveyed and assigned based on their own interests. Each special interest group met once a month for one hour. EWMS offered the following examples of interest classes: Pizza and Beyond, The Music of Our Lives, Alternate Energy, Habitat Helpers, Cowboys and Western Riding, Pet Pals, Tarheel Club and American Idol. After a year-long study of the same topic and following the end-of grade testing week, we ended the school year with a Special Interest Fair where interest groups produced culminating projects to display what they researched and learned.

Another curricular program that we are very proud of is our School-wide Novel initiative. Each year we offer a School-wide Novel Unit. We have read *Stand Tall* by Joan Bauer and *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson. Recently, we are planning to read *Among the Hidden* and *Among the Imposter* by Margaret Peterson Haddix. Many activities are based around the novels to promote character education as well as teach reading strategies. The student and teacher responses from our units are always exciting. This interactive reading experience offers the same advantages to readers of all levels. It is amazing to watch discussions that evolve from knowing that everyone is reading the same novel. As our media coordinator put it, “It is energizing for students to have input and ownership with reading”. When everyone is reading and discussing the same novel, the students can make better connections using other’s prior knowledge.

The rigorous curriculum offered at East Wilkes Middle School is a true testimony to several other aspects of our drive for excellence. First and foremost, the curriculum is strong due to the outstanding faculty and staff. Teachers submit a report card analysis at the end of each grading period. This grade analysis allows folks to reflect on why students are not being successful. Teachers must develop goals for the next grading period to address how they will help students be successful. The curriculum is also richly enhanced by family support, resources from our community, the school’s ability to meet all of the needs of our students specifically through a vast reward system, citizenship initiatives and a successful offering of academic and extracurricular activities.

Developmental Responsiveness

Each grade level or team is required to develop a service learning opportunity. We have two programs that have become the epitome of “learn and serve” activities. The first is our EWMS Bike Program. In 2007, we were awarded \$7000 for the Federal K-12 Learn and Serve Grant to expand this project. Old bicycles are donated from various contributors in the community. The students then work to repair and refurbish the bicycles. Through the help of Communities in Schools, students are chosen from one of our feeder elementary schools to receive bikes. They are invited for a reception where we present them with “like new” bikes and helmets. There are two giveaways scheduled each year. We have expanded the program to include a recycling component, Saturday Bike Safety Days and increased correspondence with the recipients.

A second service project of particular interest is our Operation Hometown Heroes Project. Students send care packages to local soldiers stationed over-seas. The students have joined forces with local businesses to secure items such as hand sanitizer and toiletry items, etc. The students also write letters to correspond with soldiers. On average, we mail around 60 packages per year. This past year, we invited several soldiers who were recipients of care packages to visit during a Veteran’s Day Assembly. It was astonishing for students to put a face to the name of a local hero.

East Middle offers many other opportunities for students to give back to their community while learning. Most of our clubs sponsor charitable activities. For example, the Student Council sponsors a community blood drive each year. The Jr. BETA Club and Young Samaritan’s Club raise money for various charities. The S.A.D.D. Club sponsors a yearly Homebase Christmas Project where food items, toys and gifts are collected for local families. Our Envirothon Team competed and won a state competition for the Learning Service Project. The Habitat Helpers Team built blue bird houses for our school campus and community members. The goal for this team was to entice blue birds to reproduce, as the numbers are drastically diminishing. Blue birds also help to eliminate insects – a nuisance in our area.

A new school-wide initiative that has been very successful is our Advisor/Advisee Program. Each student is assigned to a small group with a faculty member serving as advisor. Each day, teachers focus on one of five major components: DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), Academic Intramurals, Athletic Intramurals, Current Events, and Character Education. AA groups compete with the other grade level AA’s in both academics and athletics. The athletic intramurals include a large variety of non-traditional games that students would not otherwise experience in school, such as Frisbee-golf, Hoola-Hoops, Jenga and Penney Hockey. Academic Intramurals incorporates tests of trivia. Students work in groups to answer the questions. Trivia questions relate to history, science, sports, movies, etc. With each activity, students earn points for their AA group. At the end

of each grading period, we award the winning AA group from each grade level with a pizza or ice cream party.

Social Equity

The faculty and staff at East Wilkes Middle School are dedicated to serving each and every child that walks through our doors. We feel that all students are important and deserve the best we have to offer. To help us create an environment conducive to learning, we have developed a school-wide discipline program or card system. Students receive cards of different levels depending on the infraction. Colored Cards (major violations) are worth 5 points. White Cards (minor violations) are worth 2 points. The Discipline Task Force meets annually to revise the card system to better meet the needs of the current students. Built in to the plan are procedures for communication with parents and administration. We have also planned incentives throughout the school year to reward students for minimal point accumulation.

Recognizing students for their accomplishments is an integral part of what we do at East Middle. Teachers at each grade level plan a biweekly reward time. At the conclusion of each grading period, we celebrate students who have made the Principal's List, A-B Honor Roll, and Perfect Attendance. We also celebrate our Scorpion Pride recipients. Students are recognized for having less than 5 points accumulated in a grading period. In addition, a quarterly incentive is planned for those students with less than 15 points accumulated. At the year-end celebration, we recognized students who had earned zero points all year with trophies, students with less than 5 points all year with medals and those with less than 15 points for the year were rewarded as Scorpion Pride for the Year.

Of equal importance is ensuring that students have a voice concerning school matters. This school year, a Principal's Advisory Council was created. Two students from each team were chosen to meet monthly with the administration. This group discussed safety surveys, incentive ideas, fund raising ideas, and many other issues important to students. The East Wilkes Middle Student Council is another venue for students to raise concerns and expectations. The Student Council orchestrates a yearly dance, blood drive, and road side clean up.

Several other Wilkes County agencies are also committed to our students' well-being. East Middle received a \$1500 grant from the Wilkes County Health Department to provide healthy snack alternatives in our concession stand. With this funding we were also able to purchase an elliptical machine for our work-out room. The health department conducts annual research concerning obesity and BMI screenings. In an effort to reduce obesity, the health department provided us with the Dance, Dance Revolution program, projector and Play Station 2 unit with 30 mats for our physical education classes. They have also offered several resources for students and staff: Project Energize – targets students

who are at risk for diabetes; Eat Smart, Move More, Weigh Less – a healthy alternative weight-loss/management program, and the Scorpion Care Fair – a health fair for students and parents in the east district. We have a countywide Dental Clinic and the Mobile Expanded School Health (MESH) unit to provide annual physicals for a minimal cost. The MESH Unit also provided 5th grade students free Tetanus Booster shots, required prior to entering middle school.

Organizational Structures

High Student performance is, of course, a high priority at East Wilkes Middle. We are constantly looking for new strategies to improve student performance. The Leadership Team has been very resourceful when it comes to scheduling. We run a rotating schedule for 6th and 8th grade Language Arts and Math. The idea originated within the EC inclusion class. Some students are morning workers; others work better in the afternoon. Therefore, we created a schedule where students rotate on an A-day/B-day basis between their 2nd and 4th blocks. Once the teachers adjusted to the change, they loved the fact that each day started with a different group. Unfortunately, we have not been able to incorporate 7th grade into this rotating schedule due to our limited EC teacher resources.

The teachers at East Wilkes Middle School play an integral part in scheduling each year, as well. At the end of each year, the 6th grade teachers work on class lists for the 7th grade, and the 7th grade work on class lists for 8th grade. Through this process, we avoid creating discipline issues for the next school year. We also look at individual students and how we can more appropriately challenge them academically. In order to create class lists for the upcoming 6th grade, we plan an articulation meeting with the 5th grade teachers at the feeder elementary schools. Valuable information is shared regarding ability, behavior, parental support and essential needs for individual students.

Articulation within the East District is essential to the success of all students. East Wilkes Middle School has been instrumental in organizing and hosting articulation luncheons where the principals, assistant principals and school counselors meet to discuss the needs at each level. We plan inclusively for our orientations, PTO meetings, fall festivals, etc. We discuss fund raising issues to avoid overlap or conflict. We schedule the end of the year orientations for rising 6th grade and 9th grade students. We also provide support, motivation and inspiration for each other. In addition to 5th/6th grade collaboration, our 8th grade teachers were also able to meet with the high school teachers. This communication is invaluable when planning the best educational experience for our incoming and outgoing students. Finally, our media coordinator is collaborating with the elementary and high media specialists to promote consistency in research projects in an effort to assist students with their graduation projects.

In addition to reaching out to our affiliate schools, the staff of East Wilkes Middle School has had tremendous success in developing relationships within our community. Our students and teachers have been invited to speak at the North Wilkesboro Kiwanis Club. They have been recognized numerous times by the Wilkes County Schools Board of Education. Several local churches have provided support for our school with prayer groups, staff recognition dinners and financial resources. We have created several local business partnerships. One local business donated \$5000 to Wilkes County Schools providing East Wilkes Middle, specifically, with an additional Smart Classroom for 2008-2009. Businesses have also been a tremendous help in sponsoring our Fun Run. The Fun Run is our one school-wide fundraiser. Students take pledges and donations from family and friends. One day in early September, we allow students to walk/run for an hour. This event is built around the Healthy Child Legislation while providing us with more than \$6000. Local businesses provide monetary donations or prize items to entice students to participate in soliciting contributions. All students participate in the actual Fun Run.

Communication with stakeholders is indispensable when striving to improve student success. Weekly grade level and team meetings with the administration keep everyone abreast of current events and specific student needs. Each grade or team also meets individually to plan weekly activities. We have built in systems for communication with parents and administration as a part of our school-wide behavior plan. Teachers must maintain a parent contact log. Wilkes County Schools utilizes the Connect-Ed phone system where information can be shared via mass phone calls or e-mails. The East Wilkes Middle webpage has been evaluated as one of the best in the county. Finally, we require 100% participation in Student Led Conferencing during the first grading period.

We are continually looking for ways to increase parent participation. The majority of our parents work during the day. However, we have a very active PTO. This organization provides various types of support for our teachers. For example, the PTO provides financial resources, monthly birthday lunches, assistance with grading papers, proctors for testing, and chaperones for field trips. The PTO provides much needed support for students as well. Money is provided for students who cannot afford field trips or yearbooks. They have provided busses with video cameras for safety. The PTO also helps to sponsor the Academic-Athletic Banquet.

Our greatest successes with family support and parent involvement have come with our planning and implementing of special events. We begin each school year with a Welcome Back Open House. This year we had well over 400 people present for a Winter Night of the Arts. During the Parent Night Sports meetings we are very successful at reviewing rules, procedures and sharing our sportsmanship expectations. Students were encouraged to visit our Special Interest Fair at the end of the year. In fact, the incoming 6th

grade parents were taken on a tour of the Fair during our 5th Grade Parent Orientation Night.

We are so proud of the outstanding efforts of our students and parents. East Wilkes Middle School is a school to be watched. The dedicated staff has worked closely with all stakeholders to ensure that our vision and mission are realized and achieved. Not only do we take pride in learning, we take pride in the rewarding work we do, the students we teach, and the community we serve. Educating a child is truly the worthiest of all professions; at East Wilkes Middle School we educate our children with the intent of making a difference in their lives.

Editor's Note:

For information, please contact Jodi who is now principal at Central Wilkes Middle School.



