

Wessendorff Middle School

Educating the Whole Child

Written By Melanie Kiser

Wessendorff Middle School in Lamar CISD has gained a reputation for academic excellence and rigor, but visitors walking into the school on Friday mornings or during the school's lunch hour might be surprised at what they find: students and faculty dancing in the hallways to songs like "Cupid Shuffle" and "Cha Cha Slide" or eating to the tune of math rap songs. This is all part of what Principal Diana Freudensprung Tydlacka calls "educating the whole child."

The use of fine arts in the school's academic curriculum has worked well for Wessendorff. "Sometimes, if you didn't get it through repetition, you might get it through music or through art or through writing a poem about it," Tydlacka says.

Strategy for Success

Perhaps the most integral part of Wessendorff's holistic approach to education happens during first period when, instead of the usual advisory period or homeroom, students break off into academies addressed at developing their individual talents and strengths. Current academy options, which are separate from electives, include teen leadership, fine arts, math, science exploration, peer mediation, and conflict resolution, says Counselor Stephanie Potter. Students struggling with their math or reading can also get extra help during this time.

The rest of the school day is spent in class, where Wessendorff's strategy for success begins with the teachers, who are selected by a collaborative group of school faculty and administrators, Tydlacka says. The primary criterion is clear. "The number one thing we need is teachers who can build relationships with kids, because if you can't relate to kids, how are you going to teach them?" she says. Once hired, Wessendorff teachers rarely want to leave. Wessendorff's academic success also stems from using



Wessendorff students work on accelerated reading

QUICK FACTS

Wessendorff Middle School

LOCATION 5201 Mustang Ave. in Rosenberg

OPENED 1997

SCHOOL COLORS Blue and gray

MASCOT Colts

MOTTO Making great choices

PRINCIPAL Diana Freudensprung Tydlacka

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL Lorena Callis

ENROLLMENT 660 students

high-yield educational strategies, made famous by Robert Marzano, which include the use of compare and contrast, non-linguistic representation, creating hypotheses and asking students, "Why?" constantly. "Just to have an answer is not enough if you don't know why you gave it or how you got there," Tydlacka says.

Moving Forward with Technology

"Technology has aided in the growth, because kids learn differently now - they're more visual - so we, as a campus, have learned to adapt with the technology, as well as the strategy," Tydlacka says. In their lessons, teachers use school netbooks, laptops, palm pilots, and mp3 players. Kids can take virtual tours, do online learning activities, or keep up with a PowerPoint lecture on handheld devices.



English teacher Brenda Burrow guides students on how to do research using the Internet



Teachers incorporate music and art into lessons to educate the whole child



Wessendorff is a TEA Recognized campus

On the Honor Roll

All of these factors contribute to the school's success, which is recognized by many honors. The school has spent the last two years on the Texas Business and Education Coalition's Honor Roll, a distinction awarded to only the top 4% of Texas public schools. Wessendorff was one of only 34 middle schools to make the cut in 2009. The Colts have been district UIL academic champions for nine consecutive years now and also annually rake in gold performance awards from the Texas Education Agency. When asked to choose three words to describe Wessendorff, Tydlacka pauses for a moment before saying, "Dynamic, diverse, and just plain fun." **SLM**

MELANIE KISER is a print and digital journalist planning to graduate from Arizona State University in May and return to Texas to begin law school in the fall at the University of Texas at Austin.



The school offers PE activities that foster team work and fair play