

Three Great Programs, One Amazing School

Tyler Elementary turns the corner toward a bright future

BY CATHERINE JOUET

John Tyler Elementary, a public school at 9th and G streets, SE on Capitol Hill, is a “shining example” of what is working well for public schools in DC, according to DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee. The school’s success can be attributed to its leadership and the work of its administration, teachers, students and a very committed group of parents. The foundation of the school is its three-pillared program –Arts Integration, Spanish Immersion, and Autism/special needs. It’s a remarkable place – full of life, hope, and energy.

The momentum at Tyler began in 2004 when new principal, Michele Pierre Farid worked with community partners to facilitate improvements to the physical structure, including new windows and a new library. The library was completely renovated in 2007 by the School Library Project, an initiative of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation to completely renovate eight public school libraries. This successful project was born out of a grassroots coalition of PTA Presidents, school leaders, and community activists. Tyler’s library has a collection of thousands of brand new books donated by the Toyota Corporation.

The most recent improvements at Tyler, however, can be attributed to a first-rate principal hired in the summer of 2008. Engaged, pragmatic, and hopeful, Terry Dade was recruited from among the New Leaders for New Schools candidates put forth by Chancellor Rhee. Mr. Dade has a vision for Tyler and actively plans for its future by providing his staff with professional development opportunities and partnerships and by creating new programs and possibilities for this school.

“We’ve been thrilled with Mr. Dade’s excellent and energetic leadership,” said Ann Person and Hector Pop, parents of a preschooler in the Spanish Immersion Program. “Tyler is definitely on a positive trajectory and we’re happy to be part of it.”

It helps that Principal Dade has good material to work with — Tyler’s three unique programs are led by a cadre of extremely committed teachers and professionals. The Spanish Immersion program, started in 2005, was the first true immersion program in DCPS—students in Preschool, Pre-K and Kindergarten are taught in Spanish for 90% of their day; art, music and PE are taught in English. The success of this program has a lot to do with the mutual engagement among parents, DCPS, and Tyler faculty. While mastering a second language,



Principal Terry Dade starts students off on a race during Tyler Field Day (Spring 2009)

these students are also taught to read and write in English. Thoughtful instruction provides opportunities to learn math and science concepts in the target language as well. The program hires teachers from Spain, Puerto Rico, countries in Central America, and across the USA.

Tyler has been recognized as having one of the best programs for students with autism in the city. Students the city-wide Special Education program are challenged to apply their skills in the classroom and to develop their full potential to succeed in an academic environment, as well as in daily life at home and in the community. In November, the Washington DC Chapter of AUTISM SPEAKS hosted its annual Walk Now For Autism fundraiser and awareness event. Tyler Elementary’s team the “Tyler Tigers” was 20 members strong! The team consisted of students, parents, teachers and Tyler principal Terry Dade and his family. On April 25th, the school hosted its first Autism Awareness event in celebration of National Autism Awareness month. The evening provided an opportunity for teachers and parents of students in the program

to share facts and personal stories about teaching and living with students with Autism. Turning the Page, one of the school’s community partners, presented each family with the book “It’s Okay to be Different” by Todd Parr, a simple, playful celebration of diversity.

New Programs Funded by Active Outreach

Principal Dade spearheaded Tyler’s pursuit of funding to convert its traditional curriculum to an Arts Integration program. This July, Tyler became one of 13 DC Schools to receive the Catalyst grant (Arts Integration, STEM (Science, Technology, and Mathematics), and World Cultures).

In an Arts Integration themed school, the arts -- movement, dance, visual arts, and music -- are woven into instruction in all subjects. Among the goals of Arts Integration are increased student engagement, higher student achievement, and building a sense of community in the classroom as students encourage each other to take risks in artistic expression and communication. Tyler will collaborate with Young Playwrights Theater and Turn-



Tyler Kindergarteners painting in the classroom.

ing the Page (a nonprofit organization that supports schools in northeast and southeast Washington with literacy and photography programs), to mount a series of performances and exhibitions throughout the year.

When funding from DCPS has proven inadequate, Mr. Dade, parents, and teachers have written grants for equipment, supplies, projects, and materials. Their success has been outstanding -- over \$250,000 in grant money to date. Most recently Tyler parents applied for, and were awarded, a health and wellness grant from the General Mills Foundation in the amount of \$17,000 for an after-school "Keep Moving" program of yoga and fitness. In the pipeline are partnerships with local farm-to-school networks which will incorporate locally grown produce into the lunch program; cross-curriculum training to incorporate the Spanish language program into the Arts Integration classrooms; and a permanent fundraising committee to pursue ongoing in-kind donations and monetary contributions from foundations, local businesses, and other organizations.

Parents and families have shown their long-term commitment to the school with hundreds of hours of volunteer effort. The PTA has grown from less than a handful of members to at least thirty very active families who work nights and weekends for their children's school. Incoming PTA president, Shameka Stewart has plans to launch an onsite family resource center. Parent Steve Sweeney commented that his great ambition for the school and PTA was to continue to build on the solid sense of community that has been created.

Currently, Tyler holds regular PTA meetings the first Thursday of each month and encourages family involvement through Community Nights with Turning the Page (book readings, parent workshops, book giveaways, and dinner), volunteer work days, and movie nights. This past year the PTA hosted several "firsts": an Autism Awareness

event, an Enrollment Day Picnic, and The Art Within Us -- an evening celebration with a display of student artwork and a silent auction fundraiser.

Tyler enjoys relationships with other groups which benefit the entire school community. Its partnership with DC based law firm Akin Gump offers many benefits to the school, including an after-school tutoring program, meals for staff and parent meetings, and charter bus transportation for field trips. Tyler also partners

with Sports4kids, Arthur Ashe Tennis, Girl Scouts of America, Turning the Page, Center for Inspired Teaching, and the Department of Defense, Little Lights, and the DC Arts and Humanities Collaborative.

And construction is finally beginning on Tyler's Outdoor Classroom. The Outdoor Classroom is a parent initiative to create approximately 13,000 square feet of central green space and perimeter plantings to enhance opportunities for outdoor play and fresh air on a daily basis. The outdoor urban classroom will provide open green space, age-appropriate and ADA accessible play equipment, and a gathering place where lessons can be conducted.

But while the Tyler school community continues to be empowered by past successes and current leadership, its ultimate rewards are the smart, thoughtful, prepared, and engaged children it nurtures, who will draw on the Tyler turnaround for the rest of their lives. The popularity of Tyler's programs has resulted in DCPS allocating two new 3 year old classrooms at Tyler this year for a total of four preschool classrooms. And the Tyler community was thrilled to welcome 69 new families to Tyler this fall.

Erika Lehman, the mother of a rising second grader, speaks for many of the parents when she says, "Tyler is always working to raise its programs to the next level. There is no end to the efforts to make Tyler "the" choice school in DC. As a parent at Tyler, I always feel welcome to contribute to this ongoing push for success."

Looking forward to change and continued growth in the coming school year 2009-2010, Principal Terry Dade sums it up in his email signature.... "Three Great Programs, One Amazing School."

Catherine Jouet has been a Tyler parent for 3 years. She has two kids and sells real estate "in her spare time." ★



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