

The Blake School

Grades PreK-12 ★ Enrollment 1,389 ★ Hopkins, Minnesota ★ Private/Urban

Challenging the Mind, Engaging the Heart

A private co-educational institution that traces its roots to the early 20th century, this Minneapolis school prepares its students to become the leaders that our nation needs in the 21st century: knowledgeable, compassionate, committed, and courageous.



the prestigious Northrop Collegiate School for girls and The Blake School for boys were established, the institution as it now exists did not come into being until 1972, when the two prestigious schools merged with the co-educational Highcroft Country Day School. Gulla mentions that building character was integral to “the mission” of all three schools, and Blake’s strong commitment to diversity today also has a historical basis. Very early on, the original Blake school created an endowment so that need-based financial aid could be given to students whose families could not otherwise afford the tuition. The headmaster at the time wrote that Blake was to be “not only for the wealthy but the worthy.” The school carries on that tradition today by annually awarding \$4 million in financial aid to needy students.

Drawing its student body from 56 Twin Cities communities, the school has three distinct campuses: Highcroft, in

“A”fter a child’s immediate family, school can be the single greatest influence in helping shape a young life,” says head of school John Gulla, who has guided the journey of Minnesota’s Blake School for the past 11 years. Blake’s committed faculty makes certain that the school’s motto, *Challenging the Mind, Engaging the Heart*, remains uppermost in that journey. And its students and graduates readily agree that their Blake years have affected the way they view and approach life.

Blake graduate Alex Peterson reflects on the school’s influence: “Blake gave me the courage to take risks. I feel I am able to realize my dreams because it taught me to work hard and to believe in myself.” Equally compelling are the words of another graduate, Captain Ford Peterson, who is now a Black Hawk pilot in Iraq: “Blake taught me about courage and love of learning.” Mary, a 12th grader, tells how service helped her to “learn about people who are different from us” and “live together in harmony.” The observation of sixth grader Maddie reveals that even a highly academic school can be a fount of practical wisdom: “Sometimes, you are just good at things. Sometimes, you have to

really work at something. It is okay to be the best; but it is okay not to be the best.”

BEING THE BEST YOU CAN BE

Being the best you *can* be is another story, however. Parent Mary Wilkins Peterson, who has been active in the Blake community for 11 years, says she has witnessed the growth of her daughter “intellectually, socially, and emotionally” in a school that has shown her child “how to strive to be the best she can be in a well-balanced environment.” Other parents agree, and marvel at the way the school fulfills its avowed goal “to help children become good thinkers, good people, and just global citizens.”

Blake School has an unusual history that is steeped in character education. Although its roots go back to the early 1900s, when



On Legacy Day, older students build relationships with younger ones that help bridge campus boundaries.

Wayzata (PreK–5); Blake, in Hopkins (PreK–5 and 6–8); and Northrop, in Minneapolis (9–12). However, the thread that runs through all three is an adherence to the four core values of respect, love of learning, integrity, and courage. Each campus structures its classes and activities to promote and support attainment of these virtues. Age-appropriate codes of conduct, based on the values, exist at each campus, with each level honing skills that students have been taught previously. For example, in the lower school, many teachers use the principles and practices of Responsive Classroom as well as the Second Step program to teach empathy skills, impulse control, anger management, and conflict resolution. Blake’s middle school program reinforces the work of the lower school with a wellness curriculum that includes social-emotional components and assemblies that accent equity and pluralism. Blake’s upper school offers a variety of classes—elective and core—that promote intentional discussion of moral issues, such as ethics, gender studies, comparative literature, and comparative religion.

“At Blake, students are graced with opportunity and supported by learning to develop a meaningful place in the world,” observes parent Libby Hoops. In many cases, service to the community enhances class work. For example, students in the upper level course Read, Write and Do: A Call for Social Justice make their learning real by going out into the community and addressing a social issue discussed in class.

RELYING ON RELATIONSHIPS

Nan Peterson, director of service learning, says, “We believe relationships are the key to excellence in education—adult to adult, adult to child, and child to child.” Lower school administrator Ann Bellin calls Blake “a warm community in which everyone reaches out to each other” and says that “kids are at the center of all we do.”

Interviews with students at all levels and at all campuses show that Blake is indeed a warm community. Kindergartner Grace says, “The teachers are smart and nice

and kind and happy. They really like kids.” Grace also notes, “We think friendship is important at our school.” Third grader Colin enlarges on the friendship theme: “The kids almost always invite you to play at recess. They are nice and friendly and helpful if you fall down and get hurt.” Bullying and teasing are rare at all of the campuses. Twelfth grader Mary sums up the spirit that prevails at the school, in her description of Blake as a “supportive community where it is cool to be smart and kind.”

Julie Vang, assistant lower school director, mentions that the buddy system, used at all levels, forges trusting relationships. The fifth graders meet often with their kindergarten buddies, and this pattern is replicated in the middle and upper schools. Vang says that this system of “benevolent support” eases transition tensions and builds cross-age friendships.

CHALLENGING THE MIND, ENGAGING THE HEART

Curiosity, awe, fascination, the ache to know, to make sense of the world, to appreciate its beauties, subtleties, and complexities, to question, to create, and to connect—these are the habits of the mind that Blake aspires to cultivate in students. Gulla’s eloquent words describe Blake’s approach to learning, which provides students with challenges at every level. The school describes its curriculum as “an integrated program of academic, artistic, and athletic activities in preparation for college, lifelong learning, community service, and lives as responsible world citizens.”

Blake has made service the focal point of its character program, often allying service to the curriculum at all levels. Fifth-grade teacher Kris Westberg says, “The school creates children who care for themselves, who care for each other, and who care for the local and global communities. We believe even the youngest child can make a difference.” A visitor to Blake’s pre-kindergarten class last year would readily see evidence of the validity of this belief. When the little ones heard from Nan Peterson that the students in Light of Hope School in Kenya needed socks, they

The Proof Is in the Data

How we know character education is working at The Blake School:

- ★ Five-year averages (2005–2009) of grade point averages (GPA) and college admissions test scores of Blake School graduates reveal stellar achievement: GPA, 3.26; SAT, 1290; ACT, 28.
- ★ 31 students in the class of 2009 received National Merit Recognition:
 - ✓ 9 National Merit Semi-Finalists
 - ✓ 16 National Merit Commended Students
 - ✓ 3 National Hispanic Scholar Semi-Finalists
 - ✓ 3 National Achievement Scholars
- ★ 27 students in the Class of 2009 were Advanced Placement Scholars:
 - ✓ 16 AP Scholars (grades of 3 or higher on 3 or more AP exams)
 - ✓ 4 AP Scholars with Honors (average grade of at least 3.25 on all APs taken and grades of 3 or higher on 4 or more AP exams)
 - ✓ 7 AP Scholars with Distinction (average grade of at least 3.5 on all APs taken and grades of 3 or higher on 5 or more AP exams)
- ★ The 2008 Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS) Accreditation Constituent Survey revealed high satisfaction of parents and students with Blake School:
 - ✓ 91 percent of parents rated the school’s academic program as excellent/good.
 - ✓ 97 percent of students said the school is supportive of academic achievement.
 - ✓ 96 percent of students said that school spirit is evident.
 - ✓ 96 percent of faculty members said the school is supportive of academic achievement.

became activists. Not only did they locate Kenya on the globe, but they also collected socks, matched them, and sent them to their far-away friends, replete with drawings and words of introduction their teachers helped them to write.

The drive to help others seems to grow as the students grow. Fourth graders at the Blake campus, under the guidance of librarian Elaine Hove, created three public service announcements that were shown at Monday morning meetings. Clearly, one of the most meaningful projects undertaken by the upper school students is LearningWorks. Selected juniors and seniors as well as college students serve as tutors and mentors to motivated, high-potential but under-served middle school students in the Minneapolis Public Schools. Scott Flemming, director of LearningWorks, praises the “commitment” of Blake students “to foster the success of a diverse group of young people.”



Upper school students wrap holiday gifts for needy families in transitional housing during homeroom period.

INVOLVING PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Parents truly have a voice in this school. Not only are they involved in decision making, policy making, chairing of events, and volunteering, but they also carry out the school’s mission of building character. An event that shows the passion of the parents to carry out this mission is the annual Celebration of Community that honors the school’s commitment to diversity. Parents organize and run this much-awaited spring gala. Held in a large ice skating rink, the celebration showcases offerings in the culture and cuisine of

many countries and highlights the work of diverse community organizations. Parent and board member Asta Gersovitz praises events such as this, as well as “the broad stream of opportunities” that Blake gives the community “to explore, develop, strengthen, and share in discussions about both personal and community character.”

Another tangible example of the way the entire Blake community bonds together is Legacy Day, traditionally held

in the football stadium of the Blake campus at the beginning of the school year. The opening convocation ceremonies connect students, staff, alumni, and parent volunteers and strengthen Blake’s commitment to lifelong learning. The three service-learning activities that follow accent “giving back to the community” as those present form multi-age “legacy groups” to work on projects such as making fleece blankets for the needy or making sandwiches or packaging food for the hungry. Nan Peterson says that watching over 2,000 people working together on service activities is a heart-warming scene that makes her “proud to be part of the Blake family.”

Service is so ingrained in the fabric of life at Blake that many of its alumni remain involved in service long after they have graduated or enter fields that make it a lifelong

pursuit. Obviously, Blake has managed to produce graduates who have exhibited extraordinary academic success while still keeping their hearts open to care for those in need. When the head of school is asked for advice that could help other students develop these qualities, Gulla offers wise counsel: “Believe in yourself and care about others.” ✪

REFERENCES

Responsive Classroom. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children. Web site: www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Second Step. Seattle, WA: Committee for Children. Web site: www.cfchildren.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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WORDS OF WISDOM TO A NEWCOMER IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: *There once was a point in our recent educational past when smart, thoughtful people actually said that schools could provide “value-free education.” That is stunningly oxymoronic. One can no more provide a value-free education than one can compose a silent symphony. “Be courageous and do it for the children” is my advice.*