

Harmony School of Nature & Athletics “Gets Big” for Math and Science Education

Posted by [shawnpwilliams](#) on Mar 2nd, 2011 and filed under [Education](#), [Featured](#), [Recent Posts](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#). You can leave a response or trackback to this entry

Story by Saki Milton and Photos by Grant Meeks

There's a phrase in today's hip-hop culture that simply says "Get Big!" Now, I'd like to think I'm up on the latest and greatest in pop culture, but I had to get some help from my students to pinpoint exactly what this term is all about.

Essentially, it means doing extraordinary things, dominating, going beyond expectations while attracting the attention of everything around. I'm just going to put it out there: "We need more public schools to "GET BIG!"

But, how? Well [Harmony School of Nature & Athletics](#) in Southern Dallas leading the way and providing an example for other public schools. Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with the Harmony's administration and take a tour of the campus. Here's how they're bringing about change in the way they deliver education to students:

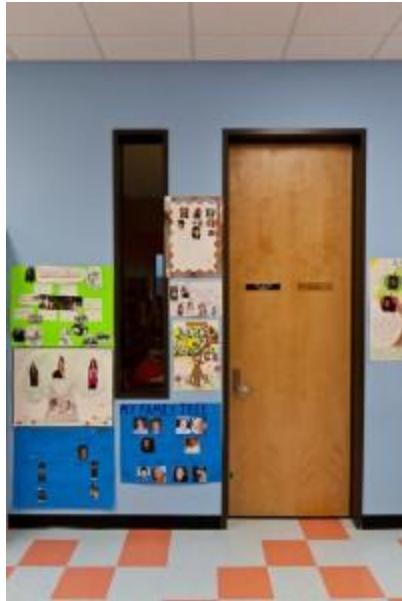
- Creating an environment that is student-centered, with an emphasis on inquiry-based learning
- Implementing a rigorous curriculum with enrichment opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom
- Building a partnership that supports student achievement—parent, school, and community.

But, before we get too far into the educational jargon, I'll briefly explain what a charter school is for those who might be afraid to ask. A public charter school is a school that receives public money (and mostly private donations) but is not subject to most of the regulations that apply to other public schools.

In exchange for a little more freedom, charter schools promise to deliver some type of specific result based on each school's charter. Additional charter school features are: attendance is by choice, families will not be charged tuition, and a school can be founded by any individual, business or organization who feels restricted by traditional public schools.

Now, back to the story...

A great first impression



Harmony School of Nature & Athletics, a K-8 public charter school, emphasizes science and mathematics, catering to students especially interested in athletics and environmental sciences such as horticulture and veterinary science. The school is nestled in the scenic hills on the southern tip of Dallas right off Camp Wisdom road, serving families from Dallas, Grand Prairie, Cedar Hill, DeSoto, Arlington, Duncanville, Mansfield and other neighboring communities.

Immediately when I drove up, the 21st century architectural design suggested that some big thinking was taking place inside. Tall ceilings, expansive hall space, a 15:1 teacher-student ratio, comfortable sitting areas, colorful walls and displayed student work proved me right. Check plus! These attributes can play a significant role in shaping the overall learning environment of a school, yet all too often; these attributes of school life can often be overlooked.

“At Harmony, students are provided a safe learning environment, minus gangs and bullies –a place where they can take risks with confidence that they won’t be ridiculed for being smart,” stated Vice Principal Don Strickland. Outdoor gardens, nature and biking trails and field trips to the Cedar Hill State park provide an abundance of opportunities for students to take their learning outside of the classroom and to naturally apply it in the real-world.



In order to do so, Harmony has implemented a strong discipline and reward system that allows teachers to “go there” with their students’ learning. Strickland goes on to say “teachers are

committed to their students and to the schools' mission. Paid less than surrounding districts, our teachers are willing to take home less pay so they can truly 'operate in their calling' without having to frequently stop class to discipline students." As a 5-year teacher, I wanted to shout, "Amen brother!"

And does this statement ring a bell: "We need to teach our kids that it's not just the winner of the Super Bowl who deserves to be celebrated, but the winner of the science fair."? Well, it should. President Obama made this statement in his January 26th [State of the Union Address](#).



Not surprisingly, every student at Harmony Nature & Athletics participates in science fair. Strickland explains, "With the science fair, we believe the experience of selecting a problem, completing experimentation steps to form a hypothesis and presenting the conclusion teaches students more than traditional science lectures – and may help them discover their potential interest in science and engineering careers."

High Expectations, High Performance

President Obama has called for our classrooms to be "a place of high expectations and high performance." As a charter school, Harmony offers a challenging curriculum that is not prescribed by the powers that be in a school district. "Most students here admit that the work is far more challenging than it was at their old schools," explained Principal Hakan Yagci. The school also offers a Talented and Gifted Program.

But, learning doesn't end after the school bell rings at 3:00. Students can participate in highly competitive academic clubs such as Math Counts and Science Olympiad. And, the [Harmony family of schools](#) (33 schools today) is notorious for racking up awards at math and science competitions. Research shows that student involvement in educational after-school programs widens career interests, reduces at-risk behaviors like drugs and truancy, enhances self-esteem, and helps social development through peer collaboration. Another check plus!

When asked what, if anything they wanted the community to know about Harmony School of Nature & Athletics, both Yagci and Strickland agreed that they would want people to know the school is truly a college preparatory school. With American students ranking 9th worldwide in college degree attainment, I can understand why.

"It doesn't make sense for students to perform at the commended level on a TAKS exam, a minimum skills assessment, but can only perform at an average level on college entrance exams like the SAT," says Principal Yagci.



Parents as partners

Unique to the school is its partnership philosophy – parent, student, school. For instance, traditional sports such as basketball and volleyball are offered, but the school is planning to start a mountain bike club and equestrian team. Activities like these would not be possible without partnering with parents.

Parent volunteers lead field trips and sponsor extra-curricular activities, including coaching. The school holds up its end of the deal by promoting trust, respect and accountability via home visits – where administration and teachers go to students' homes to learn about their families and share valuable feedback with parents about their children's social and academic progress. Big check plus!

Here's where you come in –community support. A 2008 study that looked at charter school funding in all 40 charter states and the District of Columbia found that charter students are funded on average at 61 cents compared to every dollar for their district peers (averaging \$6,585 per pupil compared to \$10,771 per pupil at conventional district public schools – Center for Education Reform May 2008). This is a problem.

Community residents of Dallas should get involved to supplement operating costs through in-kind and monetary support or donation of services and time. Perhaps, you own a landscaping business and have been praying about how you can donate some of your services to a worthy cause.

Or maybe you're an entrepreneur who has some free time during the day and sacrifice two hours a week to teach an after-school class on robotics. Maybe you're the service chair of your sorority and you've been looking for a great school to adopt by giving financial support. If you've been looking to get involved in a worthwhile service opportunity, I strongly encourage

you to consider helping Harmony School of Nature & Athletics continue to do extraordinary things and GET BIG!

Saki Milton is a middle school math teacher at Westlake Academy and co-founder of logos2400 educational services. You can reach her at smilton@logos2400.com.