

The Chicago Miracle

When Sylvia Peters arrived at the Alexander Dumas School (K-8) in Chicago, chaos prevailed. "It was," she says, "in no meaningful sense a school." She comments:

I began by collecting the guns and the knives. One of the first things I did was to put my hands on everyone. I'd gently take their faces even ones who were taller than I am and talk to them. You could feel the whole place calm down. It also stopped a lot of bad behavior.

We had sixth-graders getting pregnant. I thought for a long time about what I could say to these children about sex. I knew what kinds of situations they were coming from. I decided to tell them, "Do not have sex until you are married. You will wreck your life." Principal Peters also:

1. Implemented a character education curriculum (developed by the American Institute for Character Education) at all grade levels
2. With her faculty, defined seven values the school stood for
3. Wrote a pledge affirming these values that children and staff said together at the start of every day.

Dumas School Daily Affirmation

Let us join together and create a new approach to learning, living and loving. Let us celebrate the seven principles of self-love, respect, purpose, perseverance, integrity, creativity, faith and unity. Let us strive each day to be the best possible, treating each other as we wish to be treated and respecting human differences; and finally, let there be peace.

4. Developed a program in the arts
5. Got parents to make a commitment to encourage their children's learning

Under Sylvia Peters's leadership, Dumas School was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for educational excellence and featured on NBC television for its drug-free environment and character education program.

The Dumas education program is presented in the video "See Dick and Jane Lie, Cheat, and Steal: Teaching Morality to Kids."