

Jefferson Junior High: A 5-Year Plan

Jefferson Junior High in Washington, D.C., used to have 12 to 15 girls pregnant each year. In the past few years, there have been almost no student pregnancies.

The reduction in student pregnancies is only one improvement that principal Vera White attributes to the school's character education effort. "Ninety percent of our students," she says, "come from single-parent homes. When I arrived, parents and the community felt they were losing the children." She explains:

We met administration, faculty, parents, and students for a year. We decided we needed a 5-year plan. Year 1 focused on planning the objectives and strategies of our character education program.

Year 2 had the theme "Attitude Counts." We wanted students to have the idea that wherever you are in school, at home, at the mall your attitude makes a difference.

Year 3 focused on conflict resolution training. Year 4's theme was community service. We did this to counteract vandalism in the community on the part of some of our students. Now every student does community service.

Jefferson Junior High's character-building effort also incorporates three sexuality education programs, all of which teach students the value of abstaining from sexual activity. One of these programs, called **Best Friends**, is just for girls:

Designed for girls grades 5 to 9, Best Friends emphasizes self-respect and responsible behavior. It provides an eight-week curriculum dealing with friendship, love and dating, decision-making, alcohol and drug abuse, physical fitness, nutrition, and AIDS and other STDs. In its seventh year in District of Columbia schools, Best Friends has helped hundreds of adolescent girls to postpone sexual activity and reject drug use.

"Our overall theme," principal White says, "has been how to be responsible.' We stress and teach responsibility throughout the day. For example, our students have to have assignment notebooks and use them in *every* class.

"We also set high expectations for our parents. Our parents must come to school for Back to School Night and for teacher-parent conferences during the year. Our parents must come to school for Back to School Night and for teacher-parent conferences during the year. Our parents are also asked to volunteer 20 hours of service to the school each year."

Jefferson Junior High School now has a waiting list of 400-500 students. It has won two U.S. Department of Education awards. In the city of Washington, D.C., it has been recognized for having the highest student academic achievement, the greatest academic improvement, and the highest attendance rate.