

Parenting

SOS from Suburbia: Middle school teamwork values students

By Pam Wilson Correspondent Oct 25, 2016



Christine Holladay, director of Encompass and graduate support programming, and Autumn Wagner enjoy Chanel Dorsey's original writing at La Salle Middle School.

A mutual business contact introduced me to Lynn deLearie, part-time grants manager for De La Salle Inc. and La Salle Middle School. My next equally impressive connection was Christine Holladay, director of EnCompass and graduate support programming at De La Salle.

My goal was to bring Write ON!, a facilitated writing program, to their after-school enrichment activities. Little did I know the history or scope of what was happening behind De La Salle and La Salle's doors!

De La Salle was founded in 2001 as a private Catholic middle school, its mission to transform lives of children and the school's North St. Louis community with high-quality, affordable education. It converted last year to a public charter school – La Salle Middle School – to expand its educational opportunity to more children in a larger facility. Now, the school and De La Salle Inc. operate as a unique public/private partnership to serve students, graduates, families and their North St. Louis community.

Not only do the middle school's 105 students in fifth to eighth grade participate in after-school programs, but support is ongoing academically, socially and financially for 78 graduates now in high school and 63 more youths pursuing post-secondary education.

The outstanding leadership team keeps drawing me back. Melissa Brickey is executive director and Phil Pusateri heads school operations. Amanda Henry is interim principal and Meg Birgen serves as group assistant. With Lynn and Christine, they are incredibly passionate about their work.

"This is an innovative partnership that serves the whole-person development and well-being of children," Phil said. "The partnership, through a legal collaboration, offers important supports and programming around college access, high school access, enrichment and personal development, along with a personalized education program that offers small class sizes in a relationship-based, warm environment that is grounded in our values."

Lynn, looking to align a job more with her personal values, found her way to De La Salle in 2010. "If we give all kids a decent education, it will change how our country works and how we treat each other. This is how I can make a difference ... by helping to provide equity in educational opportunity to more children living in St. Louis."

Christine, with a background in education and theater, earned a master's degree while working in TEACH at an inner-city school in Baltimore. Later, while teaching in a south St. Louis elementary school, she met Melissa who was director of graduate support at De La Salle. First taking the assistant director position, she has built the program's size and scope. When La Salle, the school, merged forces with De La Salle, the foundation, she inherited the EnCompass program.

Calling each student by name, Christine feels she now impacts lives more. She likes teaching kids how to do things while helping them figure out their place in the world. She tries to model her own ability to rise to challenges and wants each student to define his or her own success with nothing standing in the way. Her goal is to remove obstacles and provide students with tools to succeed, the most important of which is to "be prepared."

"Most of our kids come to us two to three grade levels behind," she said. "Our goal is for them to gain one grade level skill set within the nine months of material. The overall trend is that our kids are gaining more than that in one year." Christine and her staff connect students and graduates to resources which include school-based systems like tutors and social services. Access to adults who can help them is important, too.

"To be successful, our students need to discover what they enjoy," she added, noting the value of exposure to places, spaces and people beyond their walls. They should hear words like "college" and "career readiness" often. The process of modeling research and thought processes, talking students through systems and procedures, helps them navigate problem solving.

Christine proudly shares accomplishments of La Salle Middle School graduates, the results outshining many local public school statistics:

- 98 percent of La Salle's students have graduated from high school in four years.
- 86 percent of La Salle's students who graduated from high school have been accepted to a post-secondary program or enlisted in the military.
- 86 percent of La Salle's graduates who have become high school graduates with post-secondary acceptance still pursue a degree or have graduated. Comparatively, only 21 percent of low-income students nationwide complete a bachelor's degree.

Witnessing Christine with students is inspirational. "Institutional poverty and racism don't allow kids to know how smart they are," she said. "They need access to knowledge and to be able to define success for themselves." Christine, Lynn and the entire team strive to correct the disparity in educational opportunity – one student at a time. It's a sight to see.