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Uniforms Only Scratch the Surface

Dress Code Caps an Annapolis Elementary School's Dramatic Turnaround

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After Ernestine McKnight became principal of Tyler Heights Elementary School in 1999, she frequently gave students dollar coins if they finished a marking period without being sent to the principal's office. The climate improved, and soon McKnight was running out of dollars.

Eventually, she stopped rewarding students for improving and started recognizing those who were being good. To earn a golden dollar at Tyler Heights today, a student must complete a grading period without an unfinished homework assignment.

"I want to recognize hard work and effort, because sometimes that's missed," McKnight said.

This fall, Tyler Heights became the first elementary school in Anne Arundel County where students wear uniforms. It was the finishing touch to the turnaround at the Annapolis school, which once was so vexed by disciplinary problems that teachers had little time to focus on instruction.

Yet the uniforms are only window dressing on a larger success story. Since 2003, the school has more than doubled its proficiency rate on the Maryland School Assessment tests. Proficiency went from 37 to 86 percent, or eight percentage points higher than the state average.

The gains were accomplished by students, a number of whom have difficulty with English, who come largely from poorer families. Three-quarters of students at Tyler Heights qualify for federal meal subsidies, and the limited-English population -- virtually nonexistent when McKnight arrived seven years ago -- now approaches 40 percent.

A state database shows that Tyler Heights has the highest third-grade math scores and the second-highest reading scores among 59 Maryland public schools where 70 to 80 percent of students qualify for subsidized meals.

The school's dramatic progress "proves that it can be done" at a school with profound socioeconomic challenges, said Nancy S. Grasmick, the state school superintendent.

It has become a crown jewel of Anne Arundel elementary schools, which experienced significant overall improvement in scores during the three-year tenure of former superintendent Eric J. Smith. Between 2003 and 2006, proficiency on the MSA in the county's elementary schools rose from 69 to 87 percent.

Smith instructed all schools to use the same reading and math curriculum, and he introduced pacing guides that specified what teachers should teach and when. He also instituted gifted programs at every

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elementary school. Tyler Heights has had a full-time gifted education teacher for the past year.

The school serves 255 children, some from modest, single-family homes in the Tyler Heights neighborhood, others from a pair of public housing complexes. But McKnight and her young, energetic staff try to overcome the occasional money problems. They generated enough donations to buy uniforms for every student this fall, at a price of about \$7,000.

Although PTA meetings typically draw no more than a half-dozen parents elsewhere, Tyler Heights lures standing-room crowds by offering a free dinner on back-to-school night. Science fair projects are done at school, not at home, and all students participate.

McKnight and the teachers attribute their success on the exam partly to a spreadsheet they developed with page after page of topics teachers are supposed to cover under Maryland's statewide curriculum. Teachers have found that the checklist helped them cover everything before the spring tests. Several other schools have replicated it.

"It gives them a visual look at what they have taught and when they have taught it," said Mandy Panetta, a former classroom teacher who now oversees gifted education at the school.

In class, students learn a daily MSA vocabulary word and familiarize themselves with the vernacular of the statewide test.

"Why is a topic sentence important, Alexis?" Quinn Antes, a fourth-grade teacher, recently asked.

"A topic sentence is important so they know what you're talking about," replied student Alexis Randall.

No one in class was out of uniform.

More than four-fifths of parents said they favored mandatory uniforms in a spring 2005 survey. Fourteen students showed up out of uniform on the first day. Only two or three students a day violate the policy. The school keeps backup uniforms and has a washer and dryer, which were donated by a teacher's parents.

"You don't go to class without a uniform," McKnight said.

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