

The Journey to Weehawken

Although it is part of the Union City School District, Woodrow Wilson Elementary School is housed in a former high school in Weehawken, New Jersey. Weehawken hosts Woodrow Wilson because while Weehawken's student population holds steady at about 1,000 students, Union City gains close to 12,000 students a year. Union City is one of the mostly densely populated cities in the country—some 67,000 residents live in the city's 1.3 square miles—and the Union City's school district is one of New Jersey's poorest.

Woodrow Wilson Elementary School Weehawken, NJ

365 students grades 1-8	
Students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch	60%
Student ethnicity:	
Hispanic	90%
Other	10%

More prosperous than Union City, Weehawken residents were initially wary of "inner city students" arriving in their neighborhood. Woodrow Wilson's students are "inner city students"— 90% of the students are of Hispanic origin, and about 60% qualify as low income. They are also highly motivated and high achieving, thanks, in part, to the school's

powerful, student-centered philosophy. In an openness characteristic of the school, school leaders invited their Weehawken neighbors into the school at every opportunity; ten years later the neighborhood takes pride in the school.



Union City was one of New Jersey's first districts to experiment with an arts-infused curriculum. In 1995, district leaders invited then-Gifted and Talented teacher Ron Treanor to create a new school, based on the Gifted and Talented program. As principal, Treanor

laid out a vision of "educated, well-rounded students with self-understanding and an ability to use their talents." Building on the state's broad support for arts-based education, and free to hand-pick faculty, Treanor chose teachers who were passionate about their work and had arts backgrounds, formal or informal.

Working with Anthony Buschetti, the Curriculum Resource teacher, and Whole School Reform facilitator Mimi Bair, Treanor drew on Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences and his own experience with the arts in education to develop a rigorous, creative, and effective program of student-centered learning. Students enter the school by application, and are chosen for their interest and ability in academics and the arts.

Honoring Multiple Intelligences

Prominently displayed in the school's lobby is a (student-made) poster of Howard Gardner's eight intelligences:



- Linguistic
- Logical-mathematical
- Musical
- Visual-spatial
- Bodily kinesthetic
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal
- Naturalist

Gardner suggests that we use other "intelligences" beside the conventional verbal and mathematic to negotiate the world, and that each of us has a unique set of cognitive strengths (and weaknesses). At Woodrow Wilson this means that each student is understood as an individual learner. Teachers use a range of approaches to ensure that all students find a way to grasp subject matter and demonstrate their learning.

The Woodrow Wilson philosophy joins the idea of multiple intelligences to the practice and appreciation of the arts to create what Treanor stresses is an arts-integrated curriculum. In many schools the arts are separate, often elective, classes. At Woodrow Wilson they take center stage, engaging students, tapping their multiple intelligences to acquire new knowledge and skills, and challenging them to formulate and present complex ideas.

The MIAD (Multiple Intelligences Arts Domain) embodies this approach. A MIAD is regular block of time on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons when students and teachers leave their regular classrooms to learn and practice a chosen art

activity with the rest of the school, mixing with different teachers and students from other grades. Recent MIAD offerings included ballroom dancing, jazz guitar, detective and sci-fi story writing, opera, ballet, set design, pottery, modern dance, debate, swimming, golf, popular music, Harry Potter, American sign language, and Shakespeare.

A distinctive Woodrow Wilson MIAD is "forensics," the art of debate and argumentation. Students prepare and present original speeches and interpretations of other works in competition with teams from other schools. The only public school in Hudson County to offer forensics, Woodrow Wilson students have taken the state championship for the last three years. Each of the three yearly MIAD cycles culminates in a "convocation," where students share and reflect on their work. Teachers and administrators see the MIADs as a way to honor students' interests and choices and provide a hands-on, multidimensional way to practice and refine their thinking skills.

Professional Artists Enrich Education

An outstanding feature of Woodrow Wilson's use of the arts is its long-standing relationships with major cultural institutions. Across the Hudson River from midtown Manhattan, Woodrow Wilson partners with the Metropolitan Opera,



the New York City Opera, the New York City Ballet, and the American Ballroom Association, as well as the New Jersey Council on the Arts, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, and Young Audiences of New Jersey.

Professional artists work closely with students. Fourth grade students study the "vocabulary" of movement with a professional from the New York City Ballet; every year first and second grade students create an opera, from libretto to lighting and publicity, by themselves, with guidance from a professional from the Metropolitan Opera.

"We start with the question, 'what does a student need to know?'" explains Principal Treanor, "and we make a list and cut across the curriculum and the arts." Teachers work from the New Jersey state academic standards to define the

content and skills students need to master, then design lessons attuned to their students, incorporating not only Gardner's Multiple Intelligences but Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking and the Coalition of Essential Schools' Common Principles. Teachers create class profiles in order to honor every student's strongest talents while helping to develop others. Treanor reviews all lesson plans to ensure they are academically and pedagogically sound.

Teachers have weekly cooperative planning time, both at grade level and with computer and art, language, and music teachers; both Treanor and Bair attend the teacher meetings. The school's teaching staff appeared to hold the school, its leaders, students, and each other in high esteem. One teacher described Mr. Treanor's attitude as "yes/ yes, win/win"—"his mantra is, 'we'll find the money.'" Another added: "He's so inspiring. You want to do your best." One teacher called it "the best administrative team I have seen in 32 years. We are truly valued here and we are happy to come to work." The tone among teachers was notably cooperative.

Students also find the school a safe haven. The 7th and 8th grade students mentor the 1st and 2nd grade students, easing young students into the school culture while keeping older students connected. Woodrow Wilson is like "a big



door that leads anywhere," one student said. Another likened the school to "a big car with lots of streets, and you won't get lost." "They let us expand here," a 6th grade student said. "We give students a lot of leeway to learn how they learn," explains a teacher, "We give the average student an opportunity to try amazing things, in a non-threatening atmosphere where taking risks is okay. In fact, their peers respect them for taking risks."

"Every Day is Different"

Teachers said they looked forward to going to work in the morning—in large part, it seems, because "every day is different," as one teacher explained. Because the school teaches to the students as individuals, there is no "standard" way of teaching any subject, calling on teachers to be newly creative, to find ways to help all students grasp the academic material. Said another teacher, "We've seen it work—that every child can learn something some way." Students with special needs seem to do especially well with hands-on learning, the resource teacher noted.

Teachers may use professional development opportunities to pursue arts interests, deepen their content knowledge, or enrich their teaching skills. Working with a college in New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson designs its own on-site professional development. New teachers receive focused assistance in integrating the arts into the curriculum. All teachers have the freedom to design their own classrooms and are given separate MIAD budgets to supplement their regular classroom budgets. Teachers concede that while the work is invigorating, it's hard to encompass the arts, multiple intelligences, Bloom's taxonomy, the Coalition of Essential Schools' philosophy—not to mention state and district standards—when they plan lessons. A few have left the school, overwhelmed, but the remaining teachers expressed strong commitment.

Parent involvement is strong, and parents frequently volunteer help with student productions. Thanks to an ambitious technology program Union City officials began in 1992, most classrooms and many students' home have Internet access, and parents and teachers communicate by email extensively. Almost all of the school's office staff members are ESL

certified and bilingual. Parents described Treanor as willing to do what is necessary for kids. Together with a local health care facility, the school sponsors free Mother's Day mammograms—at the school—for all female members of students' families.



Students learn through projects drawn from the district's annual set of grade-level themes. One year, for example, the 7th grade theme was the Civil War. At Woodrow Wilson, students

pitched a Hollywood movie about the Civil War, which required them to write scene synopses, enact parts of the movie, and develop project a budget. Another Civil War project entailed writing perspective journals—students wrote from the point of view of a male slave in the South, or a free female slave in the North, or a White slave owner, then acted out scenes from their journals and delivered PowerPoint presentations on their characters.

All students learn to give PowerPoint presentations. Technology is a strong theme throughout the school: each classroom has computers and Internet access, and the computer room, with banks of computers, is open all day.

Woodrow Wilson is electronically connected to all the other Union City schools and now, through a new "thin client" technology, students can access their work from anywhere in the world. All 7th and 8th grade students create e-portfolios—digital collections of their best work framed by student reflections on each piece of work. The e-portfolios go with the students when they graduate, entrées to challenging programs at their next destinations. The school also has a low-power radio station where students learn how to produce and present radio shows.

Presentation is an important part of student learning. Throughout the year, students are involved in both informal MIAD convocations and full productions of operas, musicals, or plays. Performing, Wilson teachers hold, prepares students for public presentations later in life, where poise and composure before an audience are valuable assets. But it also helps students see the value of honing a performance through rehearsals and feedback. "Students learn that polishing presentations is as important as conceiving ideas," observed Carol Fineberg in her "Portrait of Woodrow Wilson Integrated School, 2001." Students learn that, through effort, they can meet their own high standards, she adds.



Students are assessed through a battery of standardized state tests as well as teacher-designed assessments and rubrics for each learning project and each student. The district has set 20 benchmarks in each core subject: teachers benchmark student progress every eight weeks. Teachers maintain classroom and student portfolios, both to assess student progress and to create assessments. The school offers an extended day program of state test preparation from January through March for 7th and 8th grade students.

The Arts Can Benefit All Children

Students enter Woodrow Wilson in first grade—there is one first and one second grade—and again in third grade, when another class is added. These students all enter via the application and interview process, but some students enter in 6th grade, placed at Woodrow Wilson to relieve overcrowding at their old schools. These entering 6th graders provide a useful instance of so-called "ordinary" (non arts-oriented) students in an arts-integrated school. As might be imagined, they have the hardest time adjusting to Wilson—"they have to learn how to budget their own time, make decisions, and generally be more independent than they are usually asked to be," one

teacher explains—but even the most cynical of these students has eventually found a way into the school life and out of his or her “shell.”

These students reinforce Treanor’s contention that his school’s model is replicable. He and his teachers maintain that a school modeled on Wilson could succeed with any early elementary school students, artistically inclined or not. In their experience, all children can benefit from an arts-based education.

Most Wilson students test well above average in district-mandated tests, and show significant growth in higher order thinking on cognitive tests. And despite low-income backgrounds, students score high on measures of self such as social skills, competence, emotional balance, and physical and academic ability. Woodrow Wilson graduates tend to do well, forming the highest number of honors students at one district high school and the greatest number of 1000+ scores on the SAT exams in the district. They typically attend either arts-oriented Union Hill High School or technology-oriented Emerson High school, although a number go on to private high schools such as Phillips Exeter and Andover Academies. A state program, SEEDS, helps low-income students attend these prep schools.

“Our alumni come back and tell us they are more prepared for college than their peers because of the responsibility they learn to assume at Woodrow Wilson,” a teacher said. Treanor contends that “a well rounded student has a lot to contribute. [Our] graduating student has a sense of himself and what he or she has to offer the world.”

