



WHAT iGNITES US

Southern Middle School

*Real Conversations, Recognitions, and Roots for
Citizenship*

Wilson School District: Sinking Spring, PA

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Joy Rosser is currently serving as secretary on the DVR-PASCD board, teaching sixth grade science at Kennett Middle School, serving on the Pennsylvania Don Eichhorn Schools: Schools to Watch State Evaluation Team and is president of the southeast regional PAMLE board. Joy is expanding her research and writing; discovering ways people are being ignited within educational institutions, among student interactions, and within families affiliated with education.

In a recent interview with Principal, Dr. Stephen V. Burnham, and Assistant Principal, Mr. John Schroeder, I asked them about their middle level mission for all students at Wilson Southern Middle School; *family* was the common theme threaded through their responses. A recipe of *real* conversations, recognition of positive character choices, and roots for solid citizenship establishes a welcoming family atmosphere for students and staff. Re-designated as a *School To Watch* middle school this year, Wilson Southern is home to over 730 students in Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania.

Writer and public speaker, Ricky Maye best encapsulates the importance of conversation in the words, "Conversation isn't about making a point; true conversation is about going on a journey with the people you are speaking with." Burnham and Schroeder both emphasize the authentic power of conversations with students on a daily basis at their school, "being real with the kids is a powerful piece." In casual forms and focused forms, each and every conversation with students during the school day contributes to the power of relationships and confidence-building in students. Staff respects and encourages conversations in various forms to pave the journey.

"Acknowledging kids for doing the right thing," is another integral ingredient of their school success. Students understand the core values set and promoted by the school; they immerse themselves in a culture where they feel recognized and applauded for good choices and positive role modeling. Specifically, the BARK acronym (Be Safe, Attitude, Responsibility, and Kind) is more than a word on the walls, it is a mindset of how students treat one another, expect to be treated, and how they exhibit pride in all facets of their school day. Students and staff embrace the program of rewards, recognitions, celebrations, and activities. When students exhibit safe, positive, responsible, and kind behaviors in the classroom, common areas, cafeteria, and/or with technology, they are recognized! Most importantly, ALL students have the opportunity to celebrate success in the BARK program. Those students who fall short academically or behaviorally are viewed as personalized situations where teachers and staff provide supports, conversations, and plans to get students back on track and working towards meeting the expectations and values that will best serve their future.

In nurturing roots for citizenship, the BARK character education program acknowledges students who do the right thing all year long. Throughout the year, there are several collection dates where the students hand in their *BARK marks* and earn prizes and accolades. When students collect 6 BARK mark stamps, they can choose one of the many prizes (pencils, pens, candy, etc.) on the BARK prize sheet. If the student collects 12 stamps, they are able to choose from a list of prizes which may include a phone pass in the cafeteria, tee shirts, or fun activities organized and implemented by a specific staff member. Who wouldn't want to play a game of basketball with their principal, or make slime with their science teacher, or play dodgeball with their health teacher?! Each marking period concludes with large group activities (bowling, swimming, etc.) for students who have few to no infractions. The grade level teams have a lunch bunch program where they select between 10-20 students a month who have an opportunity to eat lunch with their teachers to celebrate accomplishments. These fun activities build strong relationships with the students and applaud them for following expectations.

When we view children through a caring lens, prioritizing real conversations, recognitions, and roots for citizenship, we create schools where students want to be. Wilson Southern is proud of their students, always wanting them to feel like *family*.