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CICS Wrightwood School Earns State Honor

By DERMOT CONNOLLY

The Chicago International Charter School, Wrightwood Campus at 8130 S. California Ave., was among five charter schools in the city to receive statewide recognition from the Illinois Network of Charter Schools for innovative approaches to education this year.

At a ceremony held May 21 at the Garfield Park Conservatory, CICS Wrightwood was presented with one of the Charter Up! awards for its Parent Professional Development Nights.

While schools often provide professional development opportunities for their staff and faculty, this program got what INCS calls its “seal of approval” because it offers parents a series of interactive seminars to provide them with additional teaching methods and resources to use at home.

Sharma Shackelford, spokesperson for Civitas Schools, the educational management organization that oversees CICS Wrightwood and two charter high schools in Chicago, said INCS chose the five winners out of 15 nominations submitted by school principals.

She credits Linda Andrejek, the associate director of CICS Wrightwood, and curriculum director Pat Walsh, with putting the seminar program together.

Andrejek said the winning program was started soon after the school opened in 2005, in the former St. Thomas More school building.

Like all charter public schools in the city, Wrightwood CICS is open to any student who lives in Chicago, with no admissions requirements.

Andrejek said that while currently about 620 students attend the school, that number will rise to above 700 in the fall, when eighth grade is added. When it began, the classes only went up to fifth grade, but grades have been added this year, with eighth grade being added in the fall.

“With the seminars, we kind of train parents, so they can help their children at home,” said Andrejek, explaining that the hourlong seminars are held roughly once a month, and cover various subjects that the students will be studying in the near future.

And rather than just listening to seminars, the parents also participate in “hands-on” activities, completing examples of lessons their kids will be required to master.

For instance, Andrejek said, prior to the students taking the Illinois Standards Achievement Test

earlier this year, parents were given example questions to answer so they would have an idea of what their children could expect.

Other seminars were also held before students embarked on the Young Authors project, in which children at each grade level are encouraged to write small books. At that seminar, parents had to write their own books.

And when a Parent Professional Night was held prior to the school-wide science fair, parents actually did a science experiment.

She said parent participation in the programs is very high as well, and was especially good for the science fair seminar.

“That was very popular. About 97 percent of the parents participated,” said Andrejek, noting that this was the first time every grade participated in the science fair.

She said parents had to test the water in the school, recording data and following the proper scientific procedures required of students.

“And it was very successful too,” said Andrejek, who added that the parent participation resulted in two students from the school advancing to the Area 16 competition for Chicago Public Schools.

The science fair winners are also being treated to a special field trip to the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in June.

“Our parents are really involved because they are really concerned about getting their students a good education,” said Andrejek.

She added that the students who won the Young Authors competition were also rewarded with \$10 gift cards to a bookstore chain, and several went with their parents to a workshop at Illinois State University in Normal.

“The children really work hard and try to do well because they know there could be something in it for them,” said Andrejek.

“Now that we have done this, we also have set up a science fair committee,” said Walsh, noting that the school is hoping to build on its success this year.

Walsh said the final Parent Professional Development Night is being held at 6 p.m. Tuesday, June 10, and will cover “Study Island,” an Internet-based program that students may use to access study material during the summer.

“We don’t want students to lose what they learned over the school year,” said Walsh, noting that parents will be given passwords and codes to access the program, as well as instructional material to share with their children.

“(These seminars) are really a partnership between parents and teachers. The parents were really pleased with how they worked this year,” said Walsh.

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