

Good Neighbors Walnut Hill Students Discover the Power of the Arts through Community Service



Walnut Hill Students at the Johnson School
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It has an international reputation for educating talented young artists, but Walnut Hill School also is teaching its students about the importance of community involvement.

Students are active in the school's Community Service Association, which organizes clothing drives, volunteers in a local soup kitchen and coordinates Daffodil Days for the American Cancer Society. A group of student musicians performs on Sundays in nursing homes, hospitals and other locations.

Through its Community Academy, Walnut Hill also offers students in Boston's western suburbs the opportunity to take part in enriching after-school programs in theater and dance.

Walnut Hill's commitment to its community is most evident in its innovative partnership with the nearby Johnson Elementary School in Natick and the Marshall School in Dorchester. Stephanie Perrin, head of school, believes the program is part of Walnut Hill's obligation to engage with and support public education.

"Walnut Hill believes every private school should have a public purpose, some way of contributing actively to public education," Perrin said.

Because of budget constraints, the Johnson School is able to meet only the minimum state guidelines for music and visual arts at the elementary school level. Students receive 40 minutes of music and 40 minutes of art instruction per week.

Under the supervision of Walnut Hill faculty member Steve Durning and Academic Dean Julie Faulstich, 13 Walnut Hill students meet weekly with 50 third-graders at the nearby school. The students are creating and will perform a short musical on the theme of "respect in the community." Along the way, they'll play theater games, practice how to project, design simple sets and learn songs and dances.

"It's good for the students," Durning said of the Johnson partnership. "It's like being a camp counselor, in a way. Kids like being helpful to others but there aren't many opportunities for them to do that because of their busy academic schedules. It also allows the students to learn about philanthropy and fundraising for people other than themselves."

"Walnut Hill is viewed by many in the community as an untapped resource at this point, and I think what's so encouraging is that Walnut Hill is eager to develop stronger ties with the community," said Richard King, director of fine arts education for the Natick Public Schools.

The Johnson School program grew out of longstanding partnership with the Marshall School in Dorchester. This year, 13 Walnut Hill students are serving as teachers, mentors and role models for a group of third- to fifth-graders at the school. The youngsters were elected from their classrooms as a kind of student government with the goal of making their school a better place.

With the Walnut Hill students' guidance, they staged a short musical that focused on the importance of art in school and how art can help them solve their problems. They also created posters involving the word "Respect."

The Walnut Hill students organized fundraisers and used the proceeds to buy t-shirts for the elementary school musical cast.

The partnership has been turned into an elective for the Walnut Hill students, according to Durning, its coordinator. "Back in their classroom, they draw on their experiences at Marshall in discussions about larger community issues, including urban poverty and discrimination," he said.

Perrin believes that, for Walnut Hill students, the program offers a great way of getting into the habit of stepping outside themselves and seeing that we are all connected in some way. Another benefit is that they see their own teachers in a very different way.

"Walnut Hill students also come to understand from direct experience the power of the arts to awaken imagination," Perrin said. "And they get the deep pleasure of doing meaningful work in an area of life they know a lot about, of sharing their passion for the arts in a new way."

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