



By Symone C. Skrzycki

EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Signature Producing Tomorrow's Leaders

The walls talk at Signature School.

They're adorned with poignant photos of September 11, which were donated to the school by the photographer after a student won a nationwide essay contest about "What 9/11 Meant to Me."

They congratulate students by displaying college admission letters.

They balance backpacks – there are no lockers in this environment of trust – that line the halls.

And echoing from the walls are the voices of the approximately 328 youth (in grades nine through 12) who attend Signature, Indiana's first charter school. They live by the "Signature Way."

"It really comes down to the Golden Rule," remarks executive director Jean Hitchcock from her office in downtown Evansville where the school is located.

Established in 2002, Signature emphasizes curriculum in fine and performing arts, science, technology, mathematics and liberal arts. The school operates on open admission.

"Open admission means that we have students from a range of

backgrounds – and there's not a teacher in this building who would want it any differently," Hitchcock stresses. "All students need support – some more than others. We're all in it together. The students work hard and the teachers work hard, but they all are very passionate about what they do."

The 'Sig Way'

Amira, a senior, appreciates the sense of community Signature offers.

"When I was a freshman, they (faculty members) told us about this notion of the 'Sig Way' and how we're incorporated into this educational family – looking out for people and trying to push them to do their best. Growing and being a student here, you really understand that idea is the basis and the core and the heart of what Signature is."

Hitchcock shares, "We were started by a grassroots movement of individuals, which I think sets us apart (Signature is chartered by the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation). Our philosophy is that the bar is set high. All students benefit from jumping to reach the bar, but we don't just throw them out there to jump without support.

"Part of our charter is that we'll exceed and surpass local, state and national test scores. All of our students are International Baccalaureate (IB) students. Most of them are full diploma candidates but, if not, they're all taking IB classes. With this year's incoming freshmen – the class of 2019 – we'll be an all IB school, meaning all students will be (seeking a) full diploma."

She's proud of the students – and it shows. She smiles often when describing them.

"You look at expectations. It is truly amazing – they will rise to

the occasion almost always. It's surprising what they'll do when you have the expectation that they can do it."

Global focus

The IB program, implemented in 2006, has played a huge role in Signature's growth.

"It's a holistic approach," Hitchcock explains. "Students have to take classes in math, science, English, a second language, social studies and the humanities. In addition to that, they must write a 4,000-word extended essay for original research and take a class called Theory of Knowledge where they learn about how to question."

Students also are required to complete 150 hours of Creativity, Action and Service (CAS).

Thirteen diploma candidates graduated in the school's first IB class (2008). That total reached 63 (out of 77 seniors) last year.

As students tackle an equation during Shannon Hughes' high-level math class, she shares how Signature inspires her.

"We have an obligation to help them meet their goals," reflects Hughes, the IB coordinator. "That's part of what I think is so transforming about the IB program in general – it's not just about your individual classroom.

"Students have as their goal to be a kind of learner that fits the IB profile: They're caring, they're knowledgeable, they're risk taking and they demonstrate that across their subject areas, in the Theory of Knowledge class (and in community outreach efforts such as CAS.)"

Stomping – and training – grounds

Signature is housed in a renovated 1920s hotel. Its downtown digs are part of the culture.

"The culture is very unique. I've never seen anything like it," Hitchcock comments. "We love being downtown. We don't have buses, so students have to get here on their own. They either drive or carpool. We have almost a college feel to the campus."

When lunchtime rolls around, students often head to the Robert L. Koch II Science Center across the street (where additional classes are held) and eat packed lunches in a spacious room dubbed The Commons.

Pointing to nearby restaurants, Hitchcock notes, "Once (students are) into the second semester of their freshman year, they can go with their friends and eat, or they can pick up food and do carry-out and bring it back. It's a big deal."

Additional amenities in close proximity to Signature include two libraries, the YMCA (where gym classes are held) and the Evansville Philharmonic Orchestra (located next door to Signature, it hosts school assemblies, music and dance classes and more).

Shane Thread, IB chemistry and physics instructor, describes one of the things he enjoys most about teaching at Signature.

"I'm allowed to push them. I came from (a university) and had students in the office who were crying often because they were led to believe they were something that they were not," he emphasizes, noting that many entered college with 4.0 grade point averages, but were unprepared for postsecondary curriculum. "That made me think I wanted to go

Continued on page 22



At Signature, a variety of classroom styles – both in design and instruction – stimulates creative learning. Expectations are high at the nationally-recognized school, where challenging curriculum and a special rapport among students creates a unique culture.

Signature School

Continued from page 19

somewhere else and push the students ... to make them work hard enough so that when they leave here, they have enough knowledge to be not only successful, but very successful at any college they go to.”

Making an impression

Imagine walking down the hall and hearing bellowing sounds coming from a classroom. Step inside: You’re in Joe Nelson’s AP (Advanced Placement) economics course.

Wearing a Cincinnati Bengals pullover, he’s passionately explaining the law of diminishing marginal utility and how it impacts the way businesses price goods and services. He uses Disneyland as an example.

“How many people have been to Disneyland before? Who can remember the first time they’ve gone to Disneyland?” he asks. “You walk in with your parents ...”

After a student interjects that her trip wasn’t with family, Nelson exclaims in mock exasperation, “Let the example work!” The room erupts in laughter.

Dynamic teachers, talented students and challenging curriculum are what make Signature so special.

“What I appreciate is that pretty much everyone is here to work hard and learn. People feed into each other,” reflects Philip, a junior who is involved in the math, chess and robotics clubs. “Signature is a community of driven students, driven teachers and driven administrators, and that’s really what makes it what it is.”

RESOURCE: Signature School at www.signature.edu